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When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace
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Table of Contents

Cover
Characters
Chapter 1: Long Story Short, We Got Superpowers
Chapter 2: Multiple Names Are Obligatory
Chapter 3: A Fateful Encounter
Chapter 4: Allure of the Dark Dragon
Chapter 5: Universal Crane Game Theory
Chapter 6: Reverse Crux Record
Epilogue
Afterword
A Preview for Next Time: A Glimpse into Kudou Mirei’s State of Mind
Color Illustrations
Bonus Translation Notes
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Supernatural Battles

CONTENTS

Chapter 1 ★ Long Story Short, We Got Superpowers

Chapter 2 ★ Multiple Names Are Obligatory

Chapter 3 ★ A Fateful Encounter

Chapter 4 ★ Allure of the Dark Dragon

Chapter 5 ★ Universal Crane Game Theory

Chapter 6 ★ Reverse Crux Record

Epilogue ★

A Preview for Next Time ★ A Glimpse into Kudou Mirei's State of Mind

When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace.

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CHARACTERS

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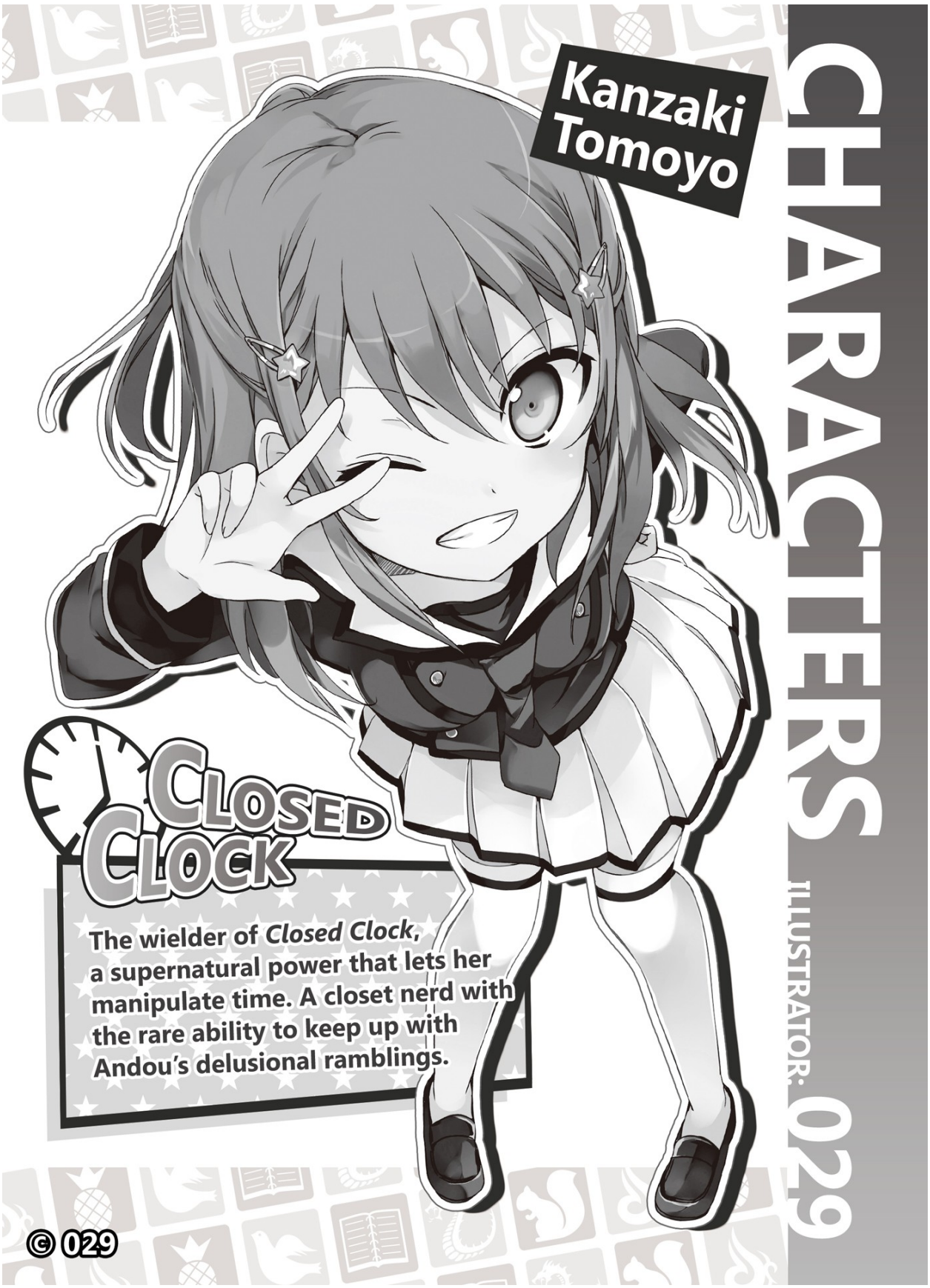
Kanzaki Tomoyo
Closed Clock
The wielder of *Closed Clock*, a supernatural power that lets her manipulate time. A closet nerd with the rare ability to keep up with Andou's delusional ramblings.

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Kushikawa Hatoko
A childhood friend of Andou's, whose power, *Over Element*, gives her absolute control over the forces of nature. She never understands a single word that comes out of Andou's mouth.
OVER ELEMENT
DARK AND DARK
A boy with a pathological case of chuunibyou and a love of supernatural battles that dates back to long before he obtained his own power. His power, *Dark and Dark*, lets him create lukewarm black fire...and nothing else.
Andou Jurai
Takanashi Sayumi
The mild-mannered and erudite president of the literary club. She's all but mastered her power, *Route of Origin*, which allows her to return anything and everything to the way it's meant to be. She mostly just uses it to mess with Andou, though.
ROUTE OF ORIGIN
WORLD CREATE
A fourth-grade elementary schooler who spends all of her time hanging out in a high school literary club, for some reason. Her power, *World Create*, gives her the ability to create matter and space freely, and she's less than reserved about using it.
Himeki Chifuyu

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Chapter 1: Long Story Short, We Got Superpowers

“Ugh… Graaauuuggggggghhhhhhhhh!”

Deep in the stygian depths of a sealed abyss, alone and desolate, I clutched at my right arm. I held it close—I held it *back*.

“Aaargh! Ugaaahhhhhh!”

I howled like a feral beast. It was all I could do—my arm was resisting me, struggling for supremacy, and my only recourse was to desperately cling to it to keep it from running wild. My left hand’s nails bit deeply into the skin of my right wrist.

My Power had gone berserk, intent on trampling over its host’s will—*my* will—and escaping from the enchainment of my body. I had to hold it back! No matter what!

“St-Stop,” I spat through clenched teeth. “I won’t let you, gods dammit!”

But try as I might to suppress them, the dark, seething emotions within me surged ever stronger, threatening to drown me in their ebon waters. A voice rang out from the depths of my being. *Destroy*, it commanded. *Destroy it all!*

The impulse was overpowering! It was maddening! It threatened to obscure the very core of my being! My sense of self was being overwritten. My own Power…was *devouring* me. My Power—that raging flame of judgment, that purgatorial inferno that reduced even the gods themselves to the pettiest of kindling…

That blackest of blazes known as *Dark and Dark*!

“Graaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!”

“Would you *please* quiet down?”

Suddenly, the lights came on, illuminating the literary club’s room. The timeworn lockers and the relatively unworn table that had just been replaced the year before were lit up in all their mundane glory. Massive metal shelves lined the walls, packed tightly with books that generations of upperclassmen had left (or abandoned, rather) for their successors to deal with.

“I could hear you guys from outside the room! What the heck are you doing in—wait, it’s just you, Andou?”

“St-Stay back, Kanzaki Tomoyo—nay, *Closed Clock*!”

“Did you really just say ‘nay’…? And stop calling me that!”

“Hurry! Flee! Go now, while I’m still…*me*!”

Tomoyo stared blankly at me as I crouched on the ground, clawing at my arm. She was cringing about as hard as it’s possible to cringe at someone.

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I clicked my tongue. “Okay, okay,” I muttered as I stood up. She’d really killed the mood. I scratched my head (with my right arm, which wasn’t really throbbing at all) and met her contemptuous gaze.

Her name was Kanzaki Tomoyo. Her hair came down to her shoulders, just barely brushing up against her uniform’s lapel, and she’d probably be considered quite the looker under normal circumstances. Her sharp glare and irritably pursed lips sort of spoiled the effect, though; at a glance, they made her look like a bit of a hard-ass.

Truth be told, she really *was* a bit of a hard-ass, or at the very least, you could say she was remarkably stubborn. She was a member of the literary club, just like me.

“Man, Tomoyo, do you *have* to be such a party pooper? Give me a break!”

“Excuse me? Don’t try to make this about me. You’re obviously the weird one here—what kinda freak locks himself up in a dark room to…what *were* you doing, anyway?”

“I was merely enduring the throbbing, excruciating pain of suppressing my dark side as it awakened within my right arm!”

“Of *course* you were. You could’ve just said you were playing make-believe like always.”

“It’s not make-believe! It’s a simulation! What’re *you* planning on doing when your arm throbs with irrepressible power and you’re forced to fight your inner self someday, huh?!”

“I won’t, ’cause it’s not gonna happen! Come on, get real. I seriously don’t understand how you can keep up all that chuuni BS day after day without getting sick of it.” Tomoyo casually brushed aside my zealous argument as she took a seat at the table. It felt like she was being a little more brusque with me than she really needed to be, but that wasn’t anything new. She took any opportunity she could find to call me out on my “chuuni” side, and the way she described it left no room for doubt that she meant it as an insult.

Fortunately, I was far too tolerant of a person to snap back at that level of insult! Besides, I knew perfectly well that someday, when *they* appeared out of nowhere and attacked her, my dark side would finally get its chance to shine! Mwa ha ha!

“It’s unbelievable, really,” I whined. “How could the bearer of a surname like Kanzaki not appreciate my worldview?”

“*What*? Where do you get off making fun of people’s names like that? Stuff it!”

“I wasn’t making fun of it! I’m actually really jealous!”

“That’s just as bad!”

But seriously, though—“Kanzaki”? Cool doesn’t even begin to describe it! The characters it’s written with literally mean “cape of the gods,” for crying out loud! The *gods*! Having “god” in your name basically means

you've won life's lottery by default! "Kanzaki" *easily* qualified for a spot on my internal top five family names list, no question about it.

On the flip side, my family name was...Andou. "Peaceful wisteria," basically. Hmph. Well, whatever. It's not like that was my *true* name, regardless.

"I used to *like* my name, before you started harping on it," sighed Tomoyo. It was starting to feel awkward being the only one who was standing up, so I sat down in the folding chair across from hers.

"Anyway, Andou," she said, resting her chin in her hand and giving me a slightly more serious look than usual, "if you don't give your weird, cringy 'simulations' a rest, you're gonna end up in a boy-who-cried-wolf situation before you know it. You'd be screwed if something nasty actually *did* awaken in you and none of us took it seriously, right? You have to think about these things—they're part of the world we live in now, after all."

"Hmph... I'm well aware. Therein lies the purpose of the simulation!"

Tomoyo sighed again. "You're impossible, I swear," she muttered, her shoulders slumping with exasperation.

In spite of our differences, I understood what she was trying to say all too well. We who really *had* awakened to extraordinary powers could no longer call ourselves ordinary people.

It had all started a half year earlier.

Our literary club's room was suddenly engulfed in a mysterious flood of light, and the five of us who were inside it at the time lost consciousness. We woke up some time later to find that we had acquired supernatural abilities. That was the day that my own power, *Dark and Dark*, awakened.

It happened so abruptly that there was no way we could cope with it, and we all fell into a complete and utter panic. I mean, can you blame us? We'd obtained supernatural powers out of absolutely nowhere, for seemingly no reason whatsoever! Nobody could explain how or why we'd been granted our powers, and that fact hadn't changed in the six months since. Had some god or paranormal entity chosen us to receive them? Or had they always lain dormant within us and just happened to awaken at that particular moment? Who knows!

No matter what the reason might've been, there was just one thing that I could say for sure: I was really, honestly, happy. I'd finally taken my first step into the world of the extraordinary I'd always longed to live in.

Was I confused? Yes. Was I scared? Also yes. But the joy I felt in that moment surpassed both those feelings by a mile.

Woo-hoo! Hell yeah! We've got superpowers*; how friggin' cool is that?!* I'd spent my whole life dreaming and fantasizing about the day I'd finally realize my own supernatural potential, and it finally, finally happened! Is there a guy out there who *wouldn't* get super hyped in a situation like that? I think not!

And thus, we departed from the world of the everyday, setting forth into an extraordinary new reality of wild, mind-bending, superpowered battles—

"*Not*," interjected Tomoyo as she slurped a cup of tea.

"I know, right...?" I grumbled, taking a sip from my own cup and then heaving a deep sigh of profound disappointment.

So, yeah. Honestly? We awakened to supernatural powers…and that's it. Absolutely nothing else happened. Not a single friggin' thing, seriously.

Some of us had been really freaked out at first, terrified by the implications of our powers and the thought of what might happen when the other shoe finally dropped. After about a month or so, though, that fear turned into more of an awkward "So, uh, I guess that's it? Huh..." sort of feeling.

The months kept passing by, each as uneventful as the last, bringing us to our current state. We could only conclude that the awakening of our powers was, in fact, all that was going to happen. There *wasn't* another shoe. Thus, we returned to our excruciatingly ordinary everyday lives.

"Come ooon," I groaned. "Something's *gotta* happen! *Anything*!"

"Would you please give up already? Getting your hopes up for something that's out of the question doesn't accomplish anything. It's been half a year—if anything were going to happen, it would've by now."

"I think not! I'm sure that any day now, a hundred magical children will be dispatched from another world to this one to fight for the right to become the king of their mystical realm!"

"Sure, and my name's Zatch. Not happening."

"Okay then, maybe other people all across the world have awakened to the same sort of powers that we have, and we'll be inexplicably drawn together to take part in bizarre battles!"

"This isn't JoJo either. Nope."

I paused. "Is it just me, or do you know an awful lot about nerd stuff, Tomoyo?" She had a surprising aptitude for keeping up with my references, even when they were relatively deep cuts.

"Don't call me a nerd! My brother's really into all those battle manga, and I just end up reading the stuff he leaves lying around the house. That's all."

Hmm. She denied it every time I tried to call her out on her nerd-like qualities, but I was positive I was onto something. Actually, come to think of it, wouldn't the fact that she knew the word "chuuni" in the first place make her a nerd by default?

Right around that point in the conversation, I ran out of tea. I stood up and walked over to the corner of the room where we kept our kettle.

"Get me a refill while you're at it, Andou," called out Tomoyo.

"Huh?" I turned around to face her—and accidentally brushed the tea caddy with my hand in the process, knocking a container of green tea off the table. Even worse, its lid was open! An epic catastrophe was playing out in front of my eyes! *Agh, crap! We just bought that stuff three days ago!*

“Oh, for crying out loud. Keep it together, would you?”

It happened in the blink of an eye. Faster, even. The next moment—very literally the next possible instant—Tomoyo, who had been seated in a chair across the room, was standing in front of me, holding the container I’d knocked over. I hadn’t seen her move at all. It was like watching a stop-motion movie with a really, really low frame rate.

“So you used it,” I declared. “You’ve exercised your power—the power to reign supreme over eternity itself: *Closed Clock*!”

Closed Clock was Kanzaki Tomoyo’s supernatural ability—the ability to bend the passage of time to her will. She couldn’t quite turn back the clock, apparently, but she could accelerate time, slow it down, or even bring it to a dead stop as she pleased.

Best as I could tell, she’d paused time the moment she saw the container of pricey tea topple from the table, walked over to it, and caught it midair. I guess the easiest way to explain the power is that it’s like a combination of The World and Clock Up.

“Yes, okay, I used it,” she admitted as I brewed a fresh batch of tea and sat back down. “But would you *please* cool it with the cringey power names?”

I was the one who’d named all of the literary club members’ superpowers. They were all like, “Names? Why would we give our powers names?” at first, but I wasn’t about to let it slide that easily! I came up with the most wonderful titles imaginable for all their abilities—it was a generous present from me to them.

I swear, though, not a single one of them understood how these things work! They didn’t get how vitally important having a name for your power is in a supernatural battle. Then again, the fact that I was the one to name their powers *did* give me something like a fifty percent stake in them, so I didn’t mind going to the trouble.

“You could’ve at least made them easier to understand,” she continued. “Like, why do they all have to be in English? Maybe if you’d picked names that made sense, you wouldn’t need to spend a whole sentence expositing about them every time you bring them up.”

“Bah! If you don’t like it, why not come up with a name of your own? I’ll approve of the change—*if*, that is, you really can think up something better than mine!”

“Since when do I need *your* approval to change *my* power’s name?”

“And besides,” I carried on, ignoring her, “everyone else seems totally happy with my names! You’re gonna spoil our group dynamic by being such a stick in the mud!”

“Or maybe they’re *not* happy with your names, but coming up with one for their own power would’ve been excruciatingly embarrassing, so they had to suck it up and make do with your chuuni nonsense.”

That’s Tomoyo, the chronic tsundere for you. Girl just can’t admit that, deep down, she really likes my names.

“By the way,” I told her, “your catchphrase is ‘Let you be trapped betwixt the hands of time and wander forever the realm of eternity!’”

“I don’t *want* a catchphrase!”

“Oh ho? I see now—you’re trying to say that you don’t care about *your* power. What you *really* want is to see *mine*, right?”

“Wrong! That’s not what I said at all! You just want to show yours off!”

“Mwa ha ha—very well, then. It’s clear you can’t be dissuaded, so I shall let you behold my power: the sable blaze, *Dark and Dark*!”

Going with “behold” rather than “see” was important, by the way. You gotta be particular about those little details.

I stood, taking great care to exude the relaxed, regal aura of confidence that only a true ruler can pull off. Tomoyo looked incredibly fed up, but I paid her no mind. I extended my right hand, grasped the shackle that sealed its power with my left—and removed it.

“Hold on,” interrupted Tomoyo. “For one thing, that’s just a fingerless glove you wrote ‘Seal’ on, and for another, you weren’t even wearing it a second ago, were you? You totally just pulled it out of your pocket and put it on before you started posing, didn’t you?”

“I am he who conquers chaos! A chaotic sea of darkness slumbers within my body, and the hellish flames of chaos are birthed from the murk! Let them devour my flesh, feast upon my soul, and manifest in this chaotic mortal realm!”

“Too long! And way too much chaos!”

“*Dark and*—wait, for real? Too many chaoses? You think so?”

“You seriously stopped *there*?! You were one word away! If you have to put on this stupid act, at least finish it!” Tomoyo leaned forward as she picked my act to pieces, and I slumped dejectedly back into my chair. *Man... I guess I should probably put a two-chaos limit on the Malediction of Unleashing after all...*

“You’re weirdly sensitive about stuff like this, y’know?” continued Tomoyo.

“I’d rather you say I’m dedicated to constant self-improvement.”

“I might have, if it weren’t for the fact that you’re pouring all that effort into improving the wrong things entirely,” she replied with a heavy sigh. “You know, I’ve gotta say, your ability is pretty much a materialization of your deepest wishes.”

“Heh! I can’t deny it.” Tomoyo probably meant that as an insult, but I laughed in the face of her sarcasm, nodded dramatically, extended my right hand, and activated my power.

Dark and Dark: the power to call forth a burst of jet-black fire from my right hand. Its flame spread out from my palm, flaring and flickering in a perpetual dance that would never coalesce into a single shape. It bore an air of sanctity, yet at the same time it carried a tinge of corruption, coming together in a strange, self-contradictory aura... Or, at least, that’s how I saw

it, anyway. It was a blaze of purest black that could burn through even the darkness itself.

And come on—how cool is *that*?! Black flames are hella cool, and I'm hella cool for making them.

"*Dark and Dark*," said Tomoyo, "the power to produce black fire from your body—period. That's all it does. A totally useless ability."

There I was, basking in the awesomeness of my power, and she just had to go and throw a pitcher of ice water on my fun. She was right, though. It really didn't do anything other than make black flames. They weren't even especially hot, thus making their effective attack power close to zero.

They were closer to an illusion than actual fire, really. Couldn't even burn a sheet of newspaper. Y'know how hot your forehead gets when you think you *might* have a fever, but aren't quite sure? They were about that hot, specifically.

In reality, fire supposedly gets closer and closer to pure white in color the hotter it gets. It's different in manga and anime, though. There, black flames are usually a step above—the ultimate fire, as hot as it gets. *Dark and Dark*, however, had less firepower than a single matchstick.

So, yeah, she had a point. It really *was* a useless ability, but I didn't let that get to me. I mean, come on—it was so cool!

"Wait... *Ahh*! Crap! I activated my ability without reciting the Malediction of Unleashing first!"

"Nobody cares! It's fine!"

"No, it isn't! If I fail to incant the Malediction of Unleashing before using my power, I'll, umm...I'll... Right, I'll be erased from this plane of existence!"

"You obviously just made that up!"

Damnations! It's not like me to blunder this badly. I'm not supposed to be able to use Dark and Dark unless I recite the Malediction. Hmm... We'll just say that didn't happen, I think. Doesn't count; moving on!

"Y'know, Tomoyo, you don't have to always sit on the sidelines and pick holes in my setup. Why not try getting in on the action a little like the others do?"

"Not happening. And what do you mean, 'like the others do'? None of them play along with your chuuni crap either."

"Yeah they do! Everyone except you's pretty into it."

"Oh, are they? Okay then—how about we put that to the test?" She shot me a defiant glare.

There was only one way I could respond to that sort of provocation. "You're on," I said with a smirk.

And so, the experiment was a go! Tomoyo hid near the door, and I went on standby in the center of the room. When one of the other members arrived at the club room, Tomoyo would shoot me a signal, and I'd initiate the same "right arm throbs with pain as my dark side awakens and tries to

assert control over me" simulation I was running through earlier. The goal was to see how each of the other members would react.

I assumed that the remaining three members had all been delayed by their own various circumstances, but considering the time, they'd probably be showing up at any moment. Just as I'd expected, a few minutes after we'd taken up our positions, Tomoyo looked over at me and mouthed the words "someone's coming!" I started clutching at my right arm and wailing in pain, just like before, and a moment later the door burst open.

"Hellooo!" called out Hatoko. "Sorry, I had cleaning duty today and it took way longer than—Juu?!"

Hatoko's expression shifted from a full-faced smile to a look of shock and horror in an instant. She rushed over to me in a panic. "Wh-Wh-What's wrong, Juu? Are you okay? Does your stomach hurt? Is it your appendix?! Do you have appendicitis?!"

"St-Stay back, H-Hatoko—nay, *Over Element*!"

"'Over'...? N-No, you were right the first time. I'm Hatoko—"

"Ugh, aaaugh! My right aaarm!"

"Your right arm?! Does it have appendicitis?!"

"N-No, it doesn't... Just because it's called appendicitis...doesn't mean you can have it in your appendages! Ugaahhh!"

"Stay with me, Juu! Don't worry, I'll call an ambulance right away!"

"No, don't! This'll actually turn into a serious problem if you—I mean, it's pointless! This isn't a problem the Japanese health-care system can solve..."

"So, umm, do you need treatment overseas? Like, an organ transplant? Do you need someone to donate you a new, healthy appendix?"

"An appendix transplant won't do me any good... Arrghhh... It burns... My body, it's aflame! Not 'on fire,' 'aflame'! It's important, trust me..."

"You're burning up?! All right, just wait! I know what to do!"

Hatoko raised her arms up high, and a jet of water bubbled up midair, manifesting into an orb that floated above her head. She had pulled the ambient moisture out of the air itself, and she could manipulate it freely. Such was Kushikawa Hatoko's power: *Over Element*!

"No, Hatoko, wait—" I stammered in vain, dropping my act just a little too late.

"Here goooes!" she shouted, bringing the watery orb crashing down onto my head.

"Guhbluhblurbublegh!" I gargled, kicking and writhing ineffectually in my aqueous prison. *Augh, there's water up my nose!*

"All right, that's enough."

It happened in the blink of an eye. The next thing I knew, Tomoyo had dragged me out of the orb, saving me from a doubtlessly terrible fate. She must have stopped time, so really, it took less time than a blink of an eye—she'd rescued me in a literal instant.

“T-Tomoyooo!” I blubbered. “Thank you! I was so scared… I thought I was gonna drown…”

“Don’t go full wimp at the drop of a hat!” shouted Tomoyo. “And agh, you’re totally soaked, so get away from me! Hatoko, hurry up and dry this moron off! And get rid of all that water while you’re at it!”

Hatoko got right to it, blinking the orb of water out of existence and drying off my hair and clothes just as quickly. Her power allowed her to return the water she’d conjured to the atmosphere once more. Once that was done, we explained the situation to her.

“Oh, is that all?” She sighed with relief. “Juu was just playing make-believe again? I was so shocked!”

“It wasn’t make-believe! It was a simulation!”

“A ‘simulation’…? So, make-believe,” she said with a casual nod. Apparently, the nuance that distinguished the two terms escaped her.

Kushikawa Hatoko was a girl who always seemed to have a gentle look in her eyes and a pleasant smile on her face. That perpetual grin brightened up every room she stepped foot in, and it was a key component of her overall image.

Hatoko was both a member of the literary club and a friend of mine since way back when we were kids. We lived in the same neighborhood, so we ended up going to the same schools ever since elementary school as a result. It was one of those friendships that develops naturally over time, whether you like it or not.

I had actually ended up joining the literary club on Hatoko’s invitation. Our school mandated that all students join a club, and since athletic clubs were totally out of the question for me, I’d already been planning on joining something a bit more relaxed. I’d ended up accepting her invitation without sparing it a second thought.

“Hatoko,” I scolded her, “*Over Element* is a brutally powerful ability that’s way too much for you to handle! I’ve told you not to use it without my express permission, haven’t I?”

“Oh, right. I guess you did! I’d completely forgotten.”

“Hmph! Well, as long as you understand. Just take care from now on.”

“Okay, I will! I won’t use, umm… What was it again?”

“*Over Element*! And don’t even dream of forgetting it!”

“All right! I won’t forget it, even in my dreams!” I hadn’t actually meant that literally, but she seemed to get the point, so I figured it would probably work out.

Kushikawa Hatoko, the bearer of *Over Element*, had the power to freely manipulate the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and light. Drawing the ambient moisture out of the air like she had moments earlier was really only the tip of the iceberg when it came to her full capabilities. The brutal strength of the earth, the surging torrents of the waterfalls, the crimson flames of hell, the savage winds of the fiercest maelstroms, and the sacred light of the heavens above all lay within her grasp.

And, well…honestly? Five elements might be sorta overdoing it. Like, that's basically cheating, isn't it? Think about how that must feel for a guy who can *only* make black fire. It's like the sort of ability an elementary schooler would make up to brag about how they had invented the ultimate, unbeatable superpower.

Seriously, give me a slice of that power pie! The worst part's that the fire she can make has way higher power than mine in every aspect…

"Hey, Andou," interjected Tomoyo, "I know you think she's stealing your thunder, but that doesn't give you the right to ban Hatoko from using her power! Cut it out."

"D-Don't be ridiculous! She's not stealing my thunder, and it wouldn't bother me even if she were!"

"Yeah, don't kid yourself, Andou. Your power is basically just a third-rate copy of hers," Tomoyo quipped sarcastically. "Fire that doesn't burn, and that's the end of it."

"Now that you mention it, I wonder why Juu's power is so weak," added Hatoko. She meant it innocently, but it still shattered my heart to pieces.

Damnations! I'll show you! I'll show all of you! One day, when we're in dire straits and all hope seems lost, my true power's gonna awaken and blow all of your minds!

Incidentally, when Hatoko says "Juu," she's talking about me. It comes from my given name, Jurai, which is just about as cool as a name could possibly get, as far as I'm concerned. I always tell everyone to call me by my given name since it rules so hard, but nobody ever seems to take me up on it.

"Say, Tomoyo," I said. "Don't you think it's about time you started calling me by my given name?"

"No way," she replied. "I mean, it's kind of a pain to pronounce. Andou works just fine."

That's pretty much how it always went. Anyway, point is, Hatoko always called me "Juu," and she wasn't showing any signs of stopping any time soon. I was sort of at a loss with her.

"Anyway," said Tomoyo, "'Jurai' is a pretty unique name, isn't it? Is there some sorta story behind it?"

"Mwa ha ha—an excellent question! If you're so desperate to know, then I suppose I shall have to enlighten you. Take care you don't regret this decision, though. None have learned the origins of my true name and lived to see another—"

"Oh, I think I know this one," cut in Hatoko. "Juu was originally scheduled to be born in June, and his parents were going to name him after the month! He ended up being born a little later than expected, though, so they had to change his name at the last minute."

"Oh, I get it. 'Jurai' sounds like 'July.'"

"It means 'a long life to come' too—I think it's a lovely name! I'm sure it'll bring him lots of good fortune."

I just stood there in silence. Curse you and your meddling, Hatoko! You ruined my chance to exposit about my true name: Guiltia Sin Jurai!

Now, the "Jurai" in "Guiltia Sin Jurai" might *sound* identical to my first name, but I took care to write it with the characters for "cursed lightning" instead of all that longevity stuff. It might strike you as odd that the bearer of the ebon flame *Dark and Dark* would have a name associated with lightning, but *actually*, the pitch-black fires of the Demon Realm have been abhorred by the masses as cursed lightning since time immemorial, so it all checks out.

"Guiltia" is derived from the word "guilty," of course. While "Sin" has a similar association on the surface, it *also* ties in to "shin," a term denoting divinity in Japanese, making it a cool play on words! In short, I was burdened with not one, but *two* inborn sins from the moment I was named!

Yeah… I'm sinful as hell, and that's hella cool. Oh, would that I could grasp atonement with these cursed hands of mine, or whatever.

"So, when all's said and done, Andou was given a sort of idiosyncratic name, took it to mean he's been 'chosen' or something, and ended up becoming the disaster chuuni he is now as a result," said Tomoyo, looking at me with something almost resembling pity in her eyes. That not-quite-pity was as cold as a raging blizzard, though, so I found myself naturally averting my gaze.

"Oh, that's right!" said Hatoko, suddenly changing the topic. "Weren't you going to keep playing make-believe like you were when I got here?"

I glanced back over at Tomoyo, and our eyes met. She had an incredibly exasperated "Are you satisfied yet?" look on her face, but I wasn't convinced.

Hmm. I mean, we've already come this far. Might as well give the other two a try while we're at it.

Tomoyo and Hatoko hid by the door, and I went on standby in the center of the room. Another member of our club arrived just a few minutes later, but unlike the rest of us, *she* didn't use the door. No, she appeared out of thin air, traveling into the room through a space of her own creation, which was business as usual as far as she was concerned.

A somewhat dainty little girl stepped out from the rippling, distorted hole in reality. Her frame was so small and her facial features were so picturesque that she almost looked like one of those super-detailed European dolls. She was holding her favorite stuffed squirrel toy in her arms.

"Ugh, aaaugh!" I bellowed, writhing as I clutched at my right arm once again.

"What's wrong, Andou?" said the little girl, Chifuyu, a trace of confusion coloring her otherwise apathetic expression.

"St-Stay back! Away with you! Not a step closer, Chifuyu!"

“Okay,” she replied with a disinterested nod before walking away from me and taking a seat in her chair. She always used the same chair because she was fond of its cushion.

“Ugraaahhhhhh! No, get away! Don’t come any closer! Don’t worry about me—just go!”

“I said okay.”

“You definitely, *definitely* shouldn’t come any closer!”

“I heard you the first time,” she droned, indifferent to the bitter end.

No, no, hold up a second—that’s not how this is supposed to go, is it?

“Arrgggh… Could it be that even as I tell you to stay away, deep down, I secretly want you to come help me…?” I muttered the second part just loud enough for Chifuyu to hear it, and she cocked her head.

“I mean, look,” I continued, “whenever the protagonist is about to get consumed by the power of darkness like this, they always shout, ‘no, get away!’ at their friends to make sure they don’t get dragged in and hurt. But their friends always come to their aid in the end anyway! It’s a given! If their friends actually took that advice and stayed away, even a protagonist would freak out! Ugraaahhhhhh!”

“This is complicated. I don’t really understand.”

“It’s a front, okay? Like, saying ‘stay away’ in this sort of situation is the same as when a slapstick comedian tells someone, ‘whatever you do, don’t push me!’ They actually *want* you to do whatever it is they’re telling you not to do! But a protagonist can’t just go saying, ‘please, help me!’ so they have to put on an act, auggghhhhhh!”

“Andou…did you hit your head on something?”

“My head’s not the problem, it’s my *arm* that’s—”

“Okay, we’re done here!” said Tomoyo, clapping listlessly to signal the end of the experiment as she and Hatoko stepped out from their hiding place. She walked over and spoke to Chifuyu in a much gentler tone than the one she always used with me. “Sorry for making you play along with Andou’s stupidity, Chifuyu.”

“It’s okay,” replied Chifuyu. “Andou always acts crazy. I don’t mind.”

“You’re such a good girl, Chifuyu! Tolerating Andou’s little games is really impressive!” said Hatoko as she patted Chifuyu’s head. Chifuyu cracked the barest hint of a smile, though I had to look really closely to see it—she must’ve been pleased by the praise.

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Unlike the rest of us, Himeki Chifuyu wasn't actually a student at our school. She was a fourth grader who went to a nearby elementary school. She also happened to be the niece of Miss Satomi, the literary club's faculty advisor, and she had been in the habit of coming by to hang out in our room every once in a while.

Half a year earlier, that habit led to her happening to be in the room on the day that our superpowers awakened, and she had been empowered right along with the rest of us. She'd started showing up more and more frequently after that, and before long she was coming by to hang out in the literary club's room practically every day. Her school wasn't *that* close to ours, but thanks to her power, *World Create*, it might as well have been right next door for all the difference it made to her.

"Tomoyo, Hatoko, I'm sleepy. Let me go. I'm gonna nap," said Chifuyu, shaking off the other girls and walking over to one of the corners of the room. Chifuyu spent an awful lot of time napping for a kid her age—maybe because she was still growing?

She held out a hand, and a truly extravagant canopy bed appeared in front of her from out of nowhere. It was as luxurious as a bed could get—it had all the frills and sequins a princess could ask for, plus a small mountain of stuffed animals on top. Chifuyu climbed onto the bed and lay down, the stuffed squirrel she'd been holding since she'd arrived still clutched in her arms. (Its name was "Squirrely," incidentally. She had a way with names that I didn't understand at all.) Then she fell asleep, her face as still and serene as that of an angel.

Chifuyu's *World Create* ability could well be described as the power of genesis itself. If she could imagine it, she could bring it into reality—space, matter, anything at all. The midair distortion she appeared through earlier was something like a warp gate—the ability to create and manipulate space at will allowed her to teleport from place to place in an instant.

Broadly speaking, her power had no limits—she could make anything and everything. She could even make things she'd never seen. Apparently, she could evoke the memory of the world itself and bring objects into being regardless of her own knowledge.

And, like...seriously? "The memory of the world itself"? What does that even mean? I could never wrap my head around it, but clearly there was some sort of intuition involved that only Chifuyu herself could understand.

"Do you get the point yet, Andou?" asked Tomoyo, her tone laden with confidence. "None of us are going to play along with your little games." The joy of victory was already written all over her face, and I clenched my teeth.

Curses! I've come this far, I can't back down now! "It's not over yet, Tomoyo! We still have one member left—I'll stake it all on *Route of Origin*!"

Once again, the other three members hid in a corner of the room (Chifuyu was still asleep, so we just left her where she was). Meanwhile, I stood in the center of the room and took a few slow, deep breaths.

Feel it. Feel the ambient mana that permeates the atmosphere, or the spiritual presence of the room, or its aura, or its ki, or whatever.

This simulation wouldn't be like the last three. *This* time, we'd had Chifuyu use her ability to completely soundproof the room for us. I'd been making a racket the previous times, to be sure, but I *had* been holding back in my own sort of way. I'm not completely oblivious; I know that not being a nuisance is important sometimes. After all, I'm one of the chosen ones: one of those who can tell when and where to go all out!

However! Thanks to the soundproofing we'd had Chifuyu set up before she went to sleep, I had nothing to fear anymore! No matter how ridiculously loud I got, there was no danger of the racket leaking out into the rest of the school. In other words, no matter how badly my right arm throbbed this time, it wouldn't cause any issues!

"Mwa ha ha! I'm just itching to get started—or, perhaps *throbbing* to get started?" I'd worked myself up into such a fit of excitement that I was dropping clever witticisms left and right. Tomoyo and Hatoko were glancing at me and whispering to each other off in the corner, but I paid them no mind. Letting them get to me would be letting them win.

A moment later, Tomoyo—who'd totally lost interest at this point—gave a listless wave to signal that my quarry was approaching. The time had finally come to pour my whole heart and soul into a death-wail to end all death-wails!

"UGRAAAAAHHHHHH!"

"Shut *up*!"

No sooner had the door opened than a girl rushed inside and grabbed my throbbing right arm. I didn't even have time to shout, "No, don't! You can't imagine the horrors that await you if you touch this arm of mine!" before she'd taken me down with a perfectly executed shoulder throw.

"*Unbelievable*! What on earth are you thinking, Andou?!" shouted the girl. "Why would you scream bloody murder out of nowhere?! *Please* stop to think about how obnoxious these stunts are for everyone around you!"

I wanted to explain that it was fine since we'd soundproofed the room, but the most I could manage was an "Arggghhhhhh!" as I clutched at my back. I wasn't even faking it this time—it was a real, genuine scream of pain. Meanwhile, our club president, Takanashi Sayumi, looked down on me as I twitched and convulsed on the floor. She was absolutely trembling with rage.

"Andou, why are you so utterly incapable of controlling yourself?! You realize that most people learn to sit still by the time they graduate from elementary school, don't you?!"

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Takanashi Sayumi was a girl with a rather rare family name that had a sort of entertaining ring to it. As it so happened, that rarity had led a number of manga and light novel creators to give the name Takanashi to their protagonists in recent years. What had once been an obscure name had become somewhat famous in its own right, though Sayumi's family name was spelled with totally different characters than the more well-known Takanashis out there.

Her hair was long and glossy, and her face had an unusually grown-up look to it for her age. Combined with her well-developed figure, she had an overall aura of maturity that the average high schooler could never hope to achieve. To top it off, her posture was incredible, and her bearing was polite and courteous. There wasn't the slightest shred of baseness or vulgarity in the manner with which she conducted herself; she came across as a true intellectual, all things considered.

Sayumi was a third-year, one year above me, and the president of our club. She was *usually* gentle and understanding, but when she got mad she could be scary as hell. Unfortunately, that happened quite a lot. It didn't take much at all to set her off, and for someone as well-mannered as her, she was weirdly quick to get physical when she was upset.

Her father was a police officer, and she'd apparently been trained in judo and aikido starting from a very early age. Violence in the name of "tough love" was her specialty. She *was* very good at what she did, fortunately—I didn't know the first thing about judo, yet I found myself landing in just the right way to not seriously injure myself after she threw me. It still hurt like hell, of course.

"Y-You've got it all wrong, Sayumi... I couldn't help it, my arm was throbbing..."

"They make topical creams for that."

"That's not—I mean, my other self was trying to—"

"What exactly do your right arm and your sense of self have to do with each other?"

"A lot, actually! There's this super convoluted—I mean, deep and lore-rich explanation for that..."

"Well go on, then. Explain it. If I'm satisfied by your 'deep lore,' I'd be more than happy to apologize."

"Sorry. I made it up. There isn't any." The pressure and intensity of her glare was too much for me, and I caved almost instantly. I was in a major fix. Sayumi had gone into lecture mode, and I was so overwhelmed that I reflexively fell to my knees in front of her and prepared myself to take it.

"How long are you planning to carry on with these ridiculous 'chuuni' antics, Andou? You realize you're already in your second year of high school, don't you?"

"Ah, that's not quite right—I'm not actually a chuuni at all, and I really wish people would...stop..."

She didn’t say a word, but that silence only made the pressure she exuded more intense than ever.

“Right, sorry, I was being super chuuni.”

“Really, now… Come to think of it, Miss Satomi told me a story about you recently. Apparently, she called you out on not paying attention during class, and you replied, ‘You mean you can’t hear it, Miss Satomi? You can’t hear the voice of the winds?’ Then she smacked you.”

“Ugh!”

“That wasn’t her only story either. She also claimed that you jumped up in class and shouted, ‘What the hell?! Can’t you see that *thing*, Miss Satomi?!’ once.”

Oooh, crap. Sayumi was a real honor student, and was definitely one of Miss Satomi’s favorite pupils. I should’ve realized that would mean she’d get all of Miss Satomi’s inside information.

“Then there was the time you shouted, ‘Oh god—everybody, get down!’ and hid under your desk.” *Oh, right, that happened. Nobody fell for it either. Talk about a disappointment.*

“And the time she asked you for something and you replied, ‘Oh? You think I’d take orders from the likes of *you*?’ and she nearly tore your head clean off.” *It was more of a punch than a tear, really, and just thinking about it sends a chill down my spine.*

“And the time she scolded you and you replied, ‘Oh, sorry, mom.’ The entire class laughed at you, apparently.”

“What does that have to do with the chuuni thing?!”

Anyway, Sayumi’s lecture carried on in that general manner for a good long while. Meanwhile, the other members of the literary club were striking up an incredibly disheartening conversation as they strolled out from the corner.

“Hey, Hatoko…has Andou always been like, y’know, *that*? Pulling super cringey stunts in class and everything?”

“Yup! He’s been that way since forever ago. Ah, but Juu always behaves himself when he’s scared of whoever he’s talking to. He only ever messes around in Miss Satomi’s lessons these days.”

“Seriously…? God, what a wimp. He’s such a small fry, it’s almost impressive.”

“Oh, Tomoyo, Hatoko. And I see Chifuyu is here as well,” said Sayumi. At that point, Tomoyo gave her a quick explanation of the situation, and she replied that she’d more or less assumed it was something along those lines. She definitely still sounded fed up with it, though.

“Uggh…” I moaned, rubbing my aching back. “Sayumi… My back hurts so much… Would you please use *Route of Origin* to fix it…?”

“Absolutely not,” she snapped. “You’re not seriously injured—man up and deal with it. I made sure to throw you in a way that wouldn’t cause any real damage.”

Takanashi Sayumi's power, *Route of Origin*, gave her the ability to return whatever she desired to however it was meant to be. It worked on anything, be it organic or inorganic. She could heal injuries, cure illnesses, and repair damaged or destroyed objects in the blink of an eye, all by putting them back to "how they should be." If I had to put it in the simplest terms possible, I'd say it's a lot like how Shining Diamond's power or Inoue Orihime's Rejection of Events works.

In any case, with that, the five of us had finally assembled.

Dark and Dark: Andou Jurai.

Closed Clock: Kanzaki Tomoyo.

Over Element: Kushikawa Hatoko.

World Create: Himeki Chifuyu.

Route of Origin: Takanashi Sayumi.

"So, we've finally gathered together once more. We, the literary club—nay, we, the Chosen Soldiers of Destiny!"

"'Nay,' my ass! You just made that up! Quit acting like it's some whole big thing!" shouted Tomoyo, irritated as ever.

Hmm. Yeah, fair enough. When she put it that way, even I had to admit that "the Chosen Soldiers of Destiny" was a little too on the nose.

We were making a ruckus, of course, with predictable results. "Mnh. You're too noisy!" grumbled Chifuyu, rubbing her eyes as she crawled off her bed. "You woke me up."

"Oh, sorry, Chifuyu. Andou was being dumb in a loud way," Tomoyo said.

"We're sorry he can't restrain himself!" Hatoko added.

"Yes, quite. My apologies for Andou's noise," Sayumi piled on.

Hey, wait—everyone's blaming this on me…? I guess they're not exactly wrong, though. Now's the time for you to be the adult in the room, Jurai—nay, Guiltia Sin Jurai! Surely you don't think you'll be able to save the world if you let trifling matters such as this grate on your nerves? Be the grown-up you are and apologize!

"I'm sorry, Chifuyu."

"Mnhh. It's okay. I forgive you," Chifuyu said in a somewhat satisfied tone, standing as tall and proud as she could manage (which wasn't very tall at all). "You're a dumbo, so you don't know better."

"Ha ha...ha. You know you don't have to force yourself to be verbally abusive like the others, right?"

Gaaah, ouch! Hearing something like *that* from an innocent girl in a total deadpan was almost enough to make me cry a little.

"Huh? But I heard you're called 'Andou' because it rhymes with 'dumbo.'"

"*Okay*, which one of you jerks has been feeding Chifuyu slander?!" I spun around to find Tomoyo, Hatoko, and Sayumi all refusing to look me in the eye. *All of them?! Seriously?!*

I sank to my knees, smote by a sudden and deep depression. None of the other four members bothered trying to cheer me up, though; instead, they

were all moving on to their own individual business. Sitting there and getting ignored by everyone was just making me feel worse, so I stood up and moved on before long as well.

That said, just because all our club's members had gathered didn't mean we had an actual club activity to get started on. Our club didn't do the whole "activities" thing in the first place, really. We put out an annual magazine around the time our school had its cultural festival, but aside from that, we didn't have much of anything to do at all.

As such, we all spent our club time however we felt like it. Tomoyo would mess around with her laptop, Hatoko would read manga (mostly romance stuff), Chifuyu would sorta just sit there and space out while hugging Squirrely, Sayumi would read complicated-looking books that I probably wouldn't understand at all, and I'd read my light novels.

The books that Sayumi and I were reading on that particular day had come from the literary club's shelves. The one thing our club had going for it was history, and the shelves in its room were packed with more books than you could count. Our predecessors had stuck us with—or rather, *gifted* us with a mountain of manga and novels, and the pile had grown bigger and bigger over the generations. By the time we'd arrived, it was a totally unmanageable quantity of books.

The lineup available to us was honestly breathtaking. We had a first edition of *Slayers*, for one thing, and a bunch of issues of *Jump* from the golden age when *Dragon Ball*, *Slam Dunk*, *Yu Yu Hakusho*, *JoJo Part Three*, and *Otokojuku* were all running concurrently just sorta lying around.

Y'know, come to think of it, wouldn't those fetch a pretty decent price if we auctioned them off online?

Out of respect for those shelves and the weight of the history they bore, I'd taken to referring to them as the Used Bookstore of the Divine: *God Off*. I'd been trying to get everyone else to call it that, but it just wasn't catching on no matter what I did. *Sniffle.*

"By the way, Sayumi?" piped up Tomoyo, looking up from her laptop. "You were pretty late today, huh? Did something happen?"

"Oh, yes. Something did, actually. The student council president, Kudou, apprehended me."

"What?!" I exclaimed, snapping my book shut. "So the time has come at last—*they* are finally making their move... It was only a matter of time—*they* have been monitoring us from the shadows ever since our powers awakened. Watch your back, Sayumi! In all likelihood, the president's one of *their* loyal minions!"

"Right, thanks. We'll take it from here, chuuni-boy," said Tomoyo, sarcastically shutting down my attempt to enlighten her about the hidden truth of the world we lived in. "What did she want to talk about, Sayumi?"

"Just petty nitpicking, essentially. Our budget's too high for a club of our size, other clubs in our position would have been forcibly disbanded ages ago... The usual." She sighed wearily.

Kudou, the student council's president, would take absolutely any excuse she could find to get on the literary club's case. I'd never actually met her myself, but I'd heard stories about how she was serious and stubborn to a fault. Apparently, she took umbrage with the fact that a club as small as ours was monopolizing our room, which *was* pretty darn huge.

In any case, I had quickly reached the conclusion that she was a fated enemy we were destined to take on in battle, and I spent ages trying to convince my fellow literary club members of the threat she posed. None of them gave me the time of day. *Hmph! Don't blame me when worse comes to worst and we're caught unprepared!*

"Of course, I can't say I don't understand where she's coming from. We *are* a club that was brought together solely out of mutual disinterest in all the other clubs available to us," continued Sayumi in a slightly self-deprecating tone.

Sayumi had been lured into joining the literary club by the Used Bookstore of the Divine, to my understanding. She was the sort of person who had an astonishing variety and quantity of interests, and I'm sure that the treasure trove of pop culture our room contained must have been a big draw for her. She certainly couldn't have found any of that stuff in the school library.

Tomoyo crossed her arms and nodded in understanding. "Yeah, I get that. Chifuyu's not a student here, so there are really only four of us on paper, and we're taking up this whole room on our own."

Chifuyu had settled down in our room half a year beforehand. We'd asked her why she was spending so much time here, and she'd replied with a very simple, "I like it here." On the one hand, that was about as direct an answer as we could hope for, but on the other hand, it didn't actually tell us anything about her deeper reasoning. On the *other* other hand, we didn't have any reason to turn her away if she wanted to hang out, so here she stayed.

"Guess that means we'll have to recruit some members," continued Tomoyo. "Sounds like a real pain, though."

"Mwa ha ha! Fret not, Tomoyo—nay, *Closed Clock*! Those who have been chosen will make their way here by their own volition, one way or another. We've no need to search for them; the unbreakable chains of destiny already bind their fates to ours!"

"Can it, chuuni." Tomoyo shot me down...

"He practically defines the word. A chuuni indeed." ...and Sayumi stepped in to deal the finishing blow.

At that point, Hatoko jumped into the conversation. "Hey," she piped up, "what does 'chuuni' really *mean*, anyway?"

"Huh? Err..." I hesitated. How do you explain it in simple terms? Hmm...

"When I'm asked like that, it's hard to answer... I don't much like to talk about my motives. But surprisingly...or rather, as I expected...the reason is the key to understanding myself..."

“She asked *you*, not the leader of the Phantom Brigade,” Tomoyo interjected, curtly cutting me off.

Dang, she actually got that one? She really does pick up on all the deep cuts. Always nice to have talent like hers around.

“I have to admit,” Tomoyo continued, “‘chuunibyou’ really is a tough concept to explain. Like, I *get* it, but only in a vague, instinctual sorta way. If I had to give an answer, I’d probably just point at Andou and say ‘people like that.’”

“Wait a second—*me*? A living example of chuunibyou? You’ve gotta be kidding!”

“What? You seriously think you aren’t?”

“That’s not what I’m saying! I mean, it’s not…exactly… Okay, look at it this way: Do you think it’s okay to call overweight people fat? If you saw someone you thought wasn’t much of a looker, would you call them an uggo to their face? No way, right? *That’s* all I’m trying to say here.”

“Now I’m more confused than ever. Are you self-aware about this or not?”

I had to think about that one for a minute. “Am I or am I not self-aware about my own case of chuunibyou?” was a *really* hard question to answer. Was I aware that people liked to use that word to make fun of people like me? Well, yeah. Did that mean I had to admit that I *was* that thing? I dunno—something felt wrong about that.

“Hmph. Am I self-aware? What a pointless question to ask. Not a single person in this realm is capable of explaining my innermost thoughts—no, not even me.”

“Wow, way to answer that in the most chuuni-tastic way possible,” Tomoyo quipped.

I was through with taking her lip and fired right back. “Hah! Look at you, thinking you can fit anyone and everyone into your sad little boxes! People like you are always going on about how ‘L’Arc-en-Ciel’s *the* visual kei band, right?’ or ‘Nisioisin’s *the* light novel author, right?’ or ‘I only read *Jump* for *Hunter x Hunter* these days’! People like you are the ones who go running your mouths online even though you don’t know crap about what you’re talking about! Get off your high horse!”

“Like *you* can talk about high horses! And screw you, I buy *Jump* every week! I even turn in the reader surveys!” she retorted.

I see somebody *knows an awful lot about* Jump*.* “Hah! I bet you only bother with the surveys cause you read about them in *Bakuman*, you bandwagon jumper!”

“What?! That’s not… Ugh!” I seemed to have hit the bull’s-eye. Tomoyo scowled, but she didn’t have a comeback for that one. Not that I didn’t get her—reading *Bakuman* really did make you wanna fill out those surveys…and I didn’t exactly have the right to talk, seeing as I’d never bothered sending in a single one of them myself.

“Anyway, that’s enough of that,” I said, trying to get us back on topic. “Let’s have a show of hands. Who here thinks they know what ‘chuunibyou’ means?”

Tomoyo and Sayumi raised their hands, while Hatoko and Chifuyu kept theirs down. It was an even split, not counting me.

“You know what it means, Sayumi?” I asked.

“Yes. Well, in terms of its literal meaning, at least.”

I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised, considering the sheer breadth of her interests. Subcultures are such a big thing these days, we might as well just call them “culture,” and she was apparently well-versed in a wide variety of them.

“I have to agree with Tomoyo, though,” she continued. “It’s a difficult term to define. I can’t say I understand it in anything more than a vague sense.”

“Mhh… ‘Chuuni’ really is complicated, huh, Chifuyu?” whined Hatoko.

“Chuuni’s complicated,” Chifuyu agreed with a nod. Neither of them were keeping up with the conversation very well, but at least they had each other.

“I pulled up a few definitions online,” said Tomoyo, who’d been typing away at her computer the whole time, “but none of them really do it for me. Like, what does ‘Chuunibyou (eighth-grader syndrome): a term referring to patterns of behavior most commonly seen in adolescent individuals’ even mean? That doesn’t tell me anything.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “that’s not helpful at all.”

“It doesn’t even touch on all the different types of chuunibyou either!” Tomoyo continued. “Like, there are chuunis who act all counterculture because they think it’s cool, chuunis who pretend to be super tough delinquents and talk about fighting all the time, and chuunis like Andou who go all ‘evil eye’ on you and live in their own weird little delusions.”

Wow, okay! Why don’t you tell me how you really feel about me?

“I guess that’s always how it goes with this sorta internet slang, though,” she added. “Dictionary definitions never seem to help much. Like, it’s the same deal with ‘tsundere.’”

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense,” I replied.

It was a really solid comparison. Back when the word first came into usage, “tsundere” meant something along the lines of “a person who’s mean to you in public, but affectionate when you’re alone with them.” These days, though, the meaning’s expanded pretty dramatically. It can be defined in all sorts of ways at this point, and it’d be all but impossible to explain the term to someone who’d never heard of it without resorting to definition by example.

“Going back to an earlier subject, I think I understand what Andou was trying to say when he was talking about being self-aware about his own chuunibyou,” Sayumi said in a quiet, thoughtful tone. “I believe the term ‘fujoshi’ might fall into a very similar category.”

“‘Fujoshi’?” I said, reflexively parroting the word back at her.

Hatoko, meanwhile, was more confused than ever. “Huh? What does ‘fujoshi’ mean? I don’t understand any of these words you keep using!” She was practically begging for someone to bring her up to speed on our jargon, but I didn’t want to derail Sayumi’s thought process, so I decided to hold off on explaining for the moment.

“You see,” she continued, “I happen to self-identify as a fujoshi, and—”

“Wait a second,” I said, derailing Sayumi’s thought process.

“What is it?” she asked, cocking her head. She doesn’t get it? Really? Really?! She dropped a bombshell like that on us without missing a beat, and she doesn’t see why we might be shocked?!

“S-Sayumi, you identify as…a fujoshi?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And you’re sure you’re using the word right? This isn’t some sort of wacky misunderstanding?”

“I’m quite sure,” she said with a smile as bright and serene as a water lily in full bloom. “Having a discerning appreciation for boys’ love is the mark of a well-mannered lady.”

I was dumbstruck. I glanced over at Tomoyo, who presumably knew that “fujoshi” meant “a woman who’s *really* into guy-on-guy homoerotica.” I shot her an “Is that true?” sort of look, and she responded with a “Definitely not” headshake.

Gotta say, I did not *see that coming! Sayumi’s a fujoshi?* She hadn’t shown any signs of it up until that moment, so I was really caught by surprise. On the other hand, she *did* have more hobbies than I could count. It was probably just another one of her myriad interests.

“So, while I’m personally self-aware of the fact that I’m a fujoshi,” she continued, “I would still be upset if someone were to say, ‘You’re into that fujoshi crap?’ or call me a ‘nasty fujo’ to my face. In short, in spite of my self-awareness, I can’t help but take offense when the term is used pejoratively.”

“Ooh, I get it!” I exclaimed. “Yeah, I can totally relate!”

She was right. In fact, she was spot-on. Like, I got that I had a bad case of chuunibyou. I didn’t really like admitting it, but I got it. Even so, I couldn’t just sit down and take it when somebody called me a chuuni and meant it as an insult!

“I’m surprised, Sayumi. You really get the whole chuuni thing after all! Which makes it weird that you’re always going right along with Tomoyo whenever she makes fun of me for it!”

“Oh, that’s quite simple to explain. I do understand chuunibyou to a certain extent, yes, but I don’t understand *you* in the slightest.” She smiled as brightly as she could while vivisecting me with her ever-sharp tongue. My heart certainly felt ready to break, at least.

“Doesn’t the word itself seem pretty off base when you really think about it, though?” I asked. “Like, it means ‘eighth-grader syndrome,’ but it’s not like it’s actually a disease.”

“Maybe not for most people, but in your case it’s definitely pathological,” Tomoyo declared. She was really dedicated to jumping in for a jab whenever she could manage, but I decided to ignore her.

“Don’t you think there should be a better name for it?” I continued. “Like ‘those who fight back against destiny, the Fatebreakers!’”

“Y’know, that’s so out there, it almost circles around to being a good idea again. Anyone who’d be happy to call themself a ‘Fatebreaker’ is *definitely* a giant chuuni.” Tomoyo sighed deeply, but I didn’t give it so much as a second thought.

Hmm. Okay, maybe “Fatebreakers” is a little too straightforward. I came up with it off the cuff, though—you can’t expect every moment of improv to produce a work of inspired genius. Good names aren’t made in a day!

I’d spent just about an eternity coming up with the names of all of our powers, which was a big part of why I was so fond of them. My own power name, *Dark and Dark*, was probably my favorite of the bunch. Like, I mean, *damn*, right? I’m so good at coming up with names, it almost scares me!

“Heeey, can’t you explain what ‘chuuni’ means yet? If you don’t hurry up, Chifuyu’s gonna start napping again!” Hatoko pleaded, breaking me out of my self-satisfied self-reflection.

Chifuyu was seated on Hatoko’s lap, clearly nodding off already. It really did look like she’d be off to Naptown at any minute. I didn’t necessarily see anything wrong with that, but I *had* reached a conclusion about what the word “chuuni” meant to me, so I decided I might as well put it on the table.

“Sorry for the wait, Hatoko, Chifuyu. Allow me to enlighten you about the truth of this world!”

“Great! We’ve been waiting for this!”

“Hurry up. I’m sleepy.”

“To have chuunibyou is to think that you just might be someone *special*. It is to indulge in dark, stylish backstories and proper nouns of your own creation, to be just a little self-absorbed, and to maaaybe occasionally get side-eyed by the people around you… It’s to be a person like me, basically. In short…”

I held my head tall and proud as I confidently declared my conclusion:

“…to be a chuuni is to never lie to yourself, even as you lie to the world!”

We with chuunibyou constantly lie to the world at large. We can’t bring ourselves to accept the dull, conventional world we’ve been born into, so we add an element of fiction to the mix and twist it to our liking. All it takes is a little lie here and there to make this a more palatable place to live.

Sometimes that means talking about nonexistent nonsense and annoying the hell out of everyone around us. We spout lies and falsehoods with wild abandon. But still, I can’t bring myself to turn my back on the feelings that

cause me to act this way. I *love* all those things that the world at large derides as “chuuni nonsense.”

Words like “stygian” and “bloody” and “calamity” are the friggin’ coolest! Shadowy agencies that conduct global conspiracies and transcendent, otherworldly beings that watch us from afar set my heart aflutter! *Every* proper noun should be elaborate enough to need a line or two of clarification! Everyone and everything needs at least one alternate name! The more stupidly overwrought, the better!

I’d *love* to save the world, or something like that, and save some cute girls along the way. *Dark and Dark* wouldn’t be even the slightest bit helpful for that sort of thing, of course, but I still love my power to death. If there’s one thing I know I can always count on, it’s that I truly like the things I like. I know that feeling will never lead me astray.

“Well, you sure made that *sound* nice,” Tomoyo said with a sarcastic smile.

“The fact that you went with ‘the world’ rather than ‘society’ or ‘your peers’ is certainly in line with your aesthetic,” added Sayumi in much the same tone. Their smiles didn’t have the derisive edge that I was used to when they made that sort of comment, though. They weren’t openly contemptful, at the very least, and I didn’t get the sense they were ridiculing me either.

“To never lie to yourself…” muttered Hatoko. “That makes being a ‘chuuni’ sound sort of cool, doesn’t it?”

“You bet it does! Being a chuuni’s as cool as it gets!”

“I see now… In that case, you really must be a chuuni after all, Juu!” she declared with a smile as bright as the sun.

Hatoko and I had known each other for a long, long time, and even after all those years, she’d never been able to understand the things I liked. In spite of that, though, I had a feeling that she understood *me* better than anyone else.

As Hatoko was smiling away without a care in the world, Chifuyu slipped off her lap and walked over to stand in front of me. “Is being a chuuni cool?” she asked.

“That’s right!” I replied. “Chuunis are the coolest!”

Chifuyu cocked her head in confusion. “But you’re not cool at all, Andou.”

A few seconds passed in total silence. Then the dam burst, and the room was filled with hysterical laughter. I, meanwhile, knelt down, placed a hand on Chifuyu’s head, and whispered in an almost mournful tone.

“That was low.”

The rest of the day passed by without incident, and eventually the time came for us to bring our club activities to a close and make our way home.

Some of us commuted by train, while others walked all the way to and from school. For at least part of the trip, though, we all took the same route.

Chifuyu could use her ability to whisk herself home in a fraction of a second, of course, but she was always one to follow her whims, and on that particular day, she decided to walk along with us at least part of the way home.

We passed through our school's front gate, chatting aimlessly as we walked along. The street beside us was tinged orange by the setting sun, and since none of the other clubs ended their activities at the same time we chose to wrap up ours, nobody else was around. I squinted as I gazed up at the blazingly red sky.

"Twilight—the hour of eventide. It won't be much longer before the beastly horrors of the gloam slither their way out of hiding..."

"Give it a rest, chuuni-boy."

"I'm quite certain he was trying to make an opportunity to show off his command of chuuni trivia and explain the association between twilight and traditional monster lore."

"Ah, right, I almost forgot! Juu, my mom said that she made some extra stew for you, so I'll bring it over later tonight."

"Sleepy..."

That's how the trip home always went: an unremarkable walk with unremarkable conversation to entertain us. But then, suddenly, something different happened.

Chifuyu let out a little gasp and pointed down the street ahead of us. There, by the side of the road, was a single cat, lying by a utility pole. Its fur was pure black, but one of its hind legs was stained a deep, dark red. The surrounding pavement was dyed the same color.

It was still alive, and I could just barely hear its faint, pained meows. Chifuyu sped off toward it without another word, and the rest of us followed after her.

"Poor kitty... It must hurt," Chifuyu muttered.

I had to agree with her. The bloodstained cat was so obviously in pain, it was hard to look at. Maybe it had been hit by a car or attacked by a wild dog. The specifics were anyone's guess, but it had definitely been through some sort of terrible accident.

I know I'm always going on about bloody this, bloody that, but when it all comes down to it, there's nothing cool at all about real-life blood. The gory scene before us was just awful and pitiful, not to mention depressing.

"Sayumi..." whimpered Chifuyu, staring up at her with an imploring look in her eyes. All of us knew in an instant what she was asking for.

Route of Origin: the power to return anything to the way it was meant to be. It worked the same way on objects and creatures alike. If Sayumi were to use her power, she could save the cat before us from the brink of death in the literal blink of an eye.

And yet, as I glanced over at her, I could see a shadow of doubt cross her face. She was hesitating. Her overall demeanor was as strong and firm as

ever, but I could still tell how conflicted she was. I knew exactly what she was going through. And so, I spoke up.

"It's all right, Sayumi."

"Andou...?"

"It's fine. It's just an injured cat. Not a big deal." *Not a big deal.* I made sure to make those words especially clear.

She hesitated for just a moment longer, then nodded. "All right," she said, and stepped up to the cat. She knelt down and laid a gentle hand on its black fur...and that's all it took. *Route of Origin* did the rest. In an instant, the cat's injury was healed, and the blood that had been spattered around it vanished. Everything returned to the way it was meant to be.

The cat let out a quick, happy meow, then dashed off down the street. Chifuyu turned around and looked up at Sayumi.

"I think the kitty said thank you."

"I suppose it did," Sayumi agreed, her voice somewhat subdued. A shadow still lingered over her expression, and I had a feeling that the rest of us looked the same way. Not even Chifuyu, the youngest of us, was smiling.

Every one of us was feeling conflicted. It was an apprehension that came hand in hand with our abilities. We were all tormented by the same doubt.

Question #1: Was using her ability to save the cat's life the right thing for Sayumi to do?

All of us—well, all of us aside from me—possessed powers that were by no means a laughing matter. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call these abilities godlike. Saving a world or two would be the simplest of tasks for them as a result...for better or for worse.

Take *Route of Origin*. Sayumi could, in theory, use it to cure absolutely anyone of absolutely any illness. If she marched on over to a hospital and healed the injuries and illnesses of each and every patient inside, she would undoubtedly bring happiness and fortune to a ton of people.

The other three's powers had the potential to be just as useful. With *Closed Clock* and *Over Element*, Tomoyo and Hatoko could probably dismantle terrorist organizations and even stop wars. Chifuyu could use *World Create* to build schools out of nothing in developing countries.

But would doing all those things be the right decision?

No. It couldn't possibly be. It would upend the world's balance. I know, "the world's balance" is a pretty ambiguous way of putting it, but it's still the best phrase to explain what I'm trying to get at here.

If illnesses and injuries were to suddenly stop being a problem, then everyone who works in a hospital would find themselves out of a job. Everyone who works at a pharmaceutical company or an insurance company would get the boot as well. Then there's the matter of age; how old would a person have to get before you decide to *stop* healing them? Eighty years old? A hundred? So many people die of "age-related complications"; how does *that* factor into the equation?

And, of course, you always have to keep in mind that literal lives would hang in the balance for each and every one of those decisions. That was too heavy a weight for Sayumi to carry, and the same was true for the other three and their powers as well. When all was said and done, upending the world based solely off our own personal points of view would be unambiguously wrong.

However…does all that logic, do all those rationalizations, mean that letting that cat die would've been the right thing to do? Would the ethical choice have been to look a living creature you could've saved in the eye, tell it "I'm sorry, I can't take responsibility for you," and walk away?

The answer to that question is no. It couldn't possibly be right. And so, in the end, we were left with no answer at all.

We just didn't know.

And so, half a year passed—half a year since our abilities had awakened. We hadn't just spent all that time playing around. We'd thought as hard as we could about all these big, looming questions. We'd worried about them; we'd agonized over them. We'd had more troubles and regrets than I can list. Frankly, many of those troubles were with each other. We'd fought and butted heads over and over.

And the answer we had obtained after all that time? "We don't know."

We had no clue what was right and what was wrong. We hadn't the foggiest idea what we should do with our powers. Even if we *wanted* to save the world, we had no idea what we could do to bring about that result.

There would never be a question #2 because question #1 could never be answered. We desperately thought it through, over and over, until we finally reached the answer that there *was* no answer. That we just didn't know.

And so, we decided to do whatever we wanted to.

Sayumi didn't save the cat because she thought it'd be a good deed or because she felt obligated to. She saved it because she wanted to. That's all there was to it. It was a completely and utterly irresponsible thing to do…but what's so wrong about that?

Long story short, the world is as cruel and brutal as it is large. Even if we do have godlike powers, children like us still stand absolutely no chance of changing it. Even if we were to try to meddle with the world, to tip the balance, it probably wouldn't be possible for us to change anything in any real fashion.

Thus, we decided not to try at all—to only do what we felt like doing. We would use our powers freely for whatever petty nonsense we felt like using them for, and if we happened to stumble across a life we could save, we might very well do so reflexively.

That logic may seem flimsy, and perhaps it is, but it was the path that we'd chosen for ourselves. It's the path we'd followed for half a year, and the path that had brought us to an injured cat we'd saved.

"Most of those big battle manga totally gloss over this whole issue, don't they?" Tomoyo mused, her face aglow with the light of sunset. "The

protagonist in those stories always ends up saving everyone around them, and that's the end of it. They never ignore anyone in need who they happen to come across, but they also never go out of their way to search for people who need their help."

"Feels like they'd find tons of them if they bothered to look," she added with a somewhat cynical smile. "It's the same deal with all those Super Sentai and Kamen Rider shows. The heroes in them never bother trying to save people from poverty or starvation, and they never go out to try to stop any wars. Superheroes are powerless in the face of the horrors that humans inflict on each other."

In so many words, a superhero really does need a villain to fight to justify their own existence. On the other hand, overthinking fiction like that isn't exactly the most productive use of time. Furthermore, there've been all sorts of Kamen Riders over the franchise's history; some of the riders in *Ryuki* and *Faiz* weren't exactly great people, for example.

I turned my gaze to the crimson-stained sky and heaved a sigh. "Ironic, isn't it? Gaining power that could rival the gods just drives home the pettiness of your own trifling existence."

My self-flagellating musing brought the conversation to a sudden stop. A moment later, Tomoyo put on an obviously forced smile and replied, "Well, it's not like your power's going to be rivaling any gods any time soon regardless."

I played along, jabbing right back at her. "Excuse me? Surely you're not talking about the obsidian flame of oblivion, *Dark and Dark*?"

"And what if I am? Got a problem with that? Just so you know, if all of us actually fought for real, you'd be the first to die for sure. Bet you wouldn't last five seconds."

"Hah! I see you understand nothing, Tomoyo! The very instant before I would perish, *Dark and Dark* would evolve into its ultimate, unleashed form! I've got this whole plot twist—ahem… My dark side, with which I'll have finally reconciled, would lend me its strength and unlock my power's true potential, allowing it to develop into *Dark and Dark…of the End*!"

"Don't give your power's next form a name before it actually evolves! That's so lame that it's painful!"

"Oh, and never fear: all of your powers have ultimate, unleashed forms as well!"

"I don't want one!"

Tomoyo shook her head with a sigh as she took down my quips one by one. Hatoko grinned happily as she watched us spar, Chifuyu didn't seem to be listening, and Sayumi smiled in that mature way she was so good at.

And so, we walked on once more. Just another group of perfectly ordinary students on their way home from school.

Supernatural Battles

Give it a rest, chuuni-boy.

Kanzaki Tomoyo
Senkou High, second year, class 3
Blood type: B
Closed Clock

Hers is the power to rule over time. One might be tempted to call it the power to stop time, but that would be an egregious oversimplification. To be precise, *Closed Clock* grants its wielder the power to diverge her own personal timeline from that of the rest of the world's, allowing her to move hundreds of times faster than everything else, thus effectively, rather than literally, stopping time.

Does time accelerate for her, or does it slow for the rest of the world?
Is she given ultimate freedom of movement, or is the rest of the world paralyzed?

None can say. The flow of time, after all, is relative.

Addendum: A while back, Tomoyo tried to make snapping her fingers whenever she stopped time a thing. She really sucked at the actual finger-snapping part, though, so she's totally given up on it at this point

Excerpt from the Bloody Vivre

CHARACTER FILE 01

Chapter 2: Multiple Names Are Obligatory

Hey there.

My name is Guiltia Sin Jurai, though in this world I'm known as Andou Jurai. I'm just your average, everyday highschooler—or so it *seems*, but that persona is merely a front! In truth, beneath that veil of mundanity lies a bearer of fantastical superpowers!

Within me lurks the forbidden blaze: *Dark and Dark*. Its corrupted sable flames have the power to slay even the gods themselves! You shouldn't even need to hear my name to know that my power and I are absolutely awash with sin—such is the nature of my very existence.

I'm just a walking bastion of sin, day in and day out. I mean, *damn*.

On that particular day, I made my way to the club room after classes ended with a spring in my step. Why, you ask? It's simple: I'd spent the last lesson of the day workshopping the Malediction of Unleashing, and I was pretty darn happy with what I'd come up with! I'd remedied the "too much chaos" problem that Tomoyo had identified in its previous rendition, and I was prepared to call this new rendition the incantation's ultimate incarnation.

All that was left was to hurry along to the club room and give it a test run! I'd take up a stance in front of the huge mirror we kept in there and cloak myself with *Dark and Dark's* stygian conflagration! It was *posing* time!

I practically skipped my way down the stairs to the first floor, where our club room was situated. However, as I reached the door, I heard somebody's voice coming from inside. It seemed I wasn't the first arrival.

I peeked through the window of our room's sliding door. There she was—the sovereign of eternity, *Closed Clock*, also known as Kanzaki Tomoyo. She was alone in the room, standing before the mirror.

"Heh heh heh..." she laughed, a dauntless grin upon her face. *What on earth is she doing?*

"All right, then. If you're so desperate to fight me, then I, Kanzaki Tomoyo, will be your opponent! I should warn you, though. My power, *Closed Clock*, grants me absolute authority over the underlying principles of this world itself! Do you really think your petty little power stands a chance against mine?"

She flicked her hair over her shoulder with a snap, not that it was any longer than her shoulders to begin with. It almost seemed like she was acting as if her hair was long enough to touch the floor. Her eyes blazed with a level-headed contempt for her "opponent," and her smile had quickly shifted into a scornful sneer.

“Clack!” she shouted out loud. I had a feeling I knew what she was going for; most likely, that was the sound her imaginary high heels made as she stomped the floor. “Regret your foolishness all you like, but it’s too late to turn back now! Let you be trapped betwixt the hands of time and wander forever the realm of eternity!”

Tomoyo—yes, *Kanzaki Tomoyo*—stood alone in the club room, posing it up and having the time of her life.

I’d love to know what sort of face *I* was making as I watched this spectacle unfold—or, at least, that’s what I would say if it weren’t for the fact that I could see my reflection in the glass. Honestly, I looked *ecstatic*.

I flung open the door. Tomoyo jumped, then she slowly turned around to face me, moving so stiffly and jerkily she looked like she was doing the robot.

“A-A-A-Andou…” The color briefly drained from her face, then returned in force as a massive blush. Her mouth kept flapping open and shut, but it took her a minute to actually make any sound. “W-W-W-Were you watching?”

I paused for a moment, searching for the perfect phrase to express all the thoughts that were running through my head at once—and then I found it.

“Nice one, chuuni-girl!”

“Gyaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!”

The very next moment, Tomoyo was gone. I figured she’d used her power to flee the room, but was proven wrong a second later when I noticed her curled up in a fetal position in a corner, clutching at her head.

“Just kill me, please…” Tomoyo muttered. She was now sitting at the table, her face buried in her hands.

“There, there,” I said, giving her a comforting pat on the back. I knew how to behave like a gentleman in circumstances like these. “But man, I can’t believe you, Tomoyo! After all those complaints, you really did like the name I gave your ability after all! Guess all that moaning and groaning was just you being a huge tsundere?”

“D-Don’t get carried away, jerk!” she shouted, scowling at me as tears built up in the corners of her eyes. Normally, her glare scared the crap out of me, but I didn’t find it intimidating at all this time. For that matter, I couldn’t stop myself from smirking, no matter how hard I tried.

“‘Don’t get carried away’? Oh, *please*. Remind me, which one of us was holed up in our club room posing in front of the mirror just a minute ago?”

“I…! Urgh… D-Don’t act like you don’t do the exact same thing all the time…”

“Yup, I sure do. I mean, of course I do! It’s hella cool! I don’t consider it embarrassing in the slightest. But remind me, who is it who’s always telling me how my most wonderful of ceremonies is such a ‘chuuni’ thing to do?”

“Ugh… S-Sure, laugh it up, why don’t you?”

“Now, hold on a moment—I’m not laughing at you at all! On the contrary, I’m practically aquiver with joy! I’ve finally found myself a like-minded comrade!”

“We are *not* like-minded!” She bent over and groaned incoherently, but I still couldn’t stop smirking.

“Hmm? Well then, whyever were you posing like that? I thought you *hated* all that ‘chuuni nonsense’?”

She was still trembling with mortification, but eventually, Tomoyo managed to start explaining herself in short, stammered fragments. “Yeah, I hate that chuuni crap. I despise it! All those stupid names and ridiculous plotlines you come up with are seriously as cringey as it gets... B-But, every once in a while—like, *seriously* rarely—I might think...they’re just a little...cool.”

“Oho, is that so?”

“E-Especially *Closed Clock*. It’s...a pretty decent name. It may be English for no good reason, but it’s got a nice ring to it, and it fits my ability well. Especially when you add ‘sovereign of eternity’ before it—that’s a little cool... J-Just a little, though!”

“Mwa ha ha... Mwaaa ha ha ha ha haaa!” I couldn’t hold in my laughter any longer. Holy crap, this is the best! She said my names are good! She actually complimented them!

The best kind of compliment you can give me is complimenting my naming sense. Getting a compliment about my appearance or personality would be nothing in comparison. I was so happy, I could hardly bear it. *C’mon, Tomoyo, if you can be this nice, you should’ve done it ages ago! And it looks like you’ve taken a liking to the catchphrase I came up with for you too!*

“D-Don’t get me wrong, okay?! It really is just every once in a while! It barely ever happens! I’m saying that ninety-nine percent of the stuff you come up with’s *garbage*, but that last one percent’s just a little bit better than the rest of the bunch!”

“Mwa ha ha! No need to put on a front, Tomoyo. What do you say the two of us descend into the depths of chaotic darkness together?”

“Aaargh, no! Seriously, cut it out with that crap! And get it through your head that slapping ‘chaos’ onto something doesn’t automatically make it cooler!”

“Oh, there you go again! Say what you will, but the truth is that deep down inside, you think it’s cool.”

“Gaaahhhhhh! You! Little!”

My taunting had finally gotten the better of her. Tomoyo shot up from her chair and shot me a look that could kill. “Get up!” she shouted. “We’re settling this, here and now! And just so you know, your petty little superpower doesn’t stand a chance against mine!”

“Oh no, please, *spare* me! *Closed Clock* grants you absolute authority over the underlying principles of this world itself—I could never hold a candle against you! Oh, I’m so scared!”

“Agh! It’s... Ugh! Aaauuuggghhhhhh!” Tomoyo, who had only stood up just a second ago, fell face-first onto the table.

I’d done it! Absolute victory was mine! I knew all the classic chuuni weak points. As Shinomori Aoshi would put it: “I know your swordsmanship all too well—after all, it is my own.”

For a chuuni who makes the sort of speech I’d caught her in the middle of, what hurts more than being ignored, more than being told off, more than being scorned, is being laughed at. *That’s* more painful than anything, and I could feel her anguish clearly.

“Hmph! It seems I didn’t even need *Dark and Dark* to finish off the likes of you,” I boasted. It wasn’t every day that I could feel like I’d actually won against one of our club’s other members, so I had to take the opportunity to revel in my victory while I could. “*True* power, you see, grows in potency when you refrain from using it frivolously, just as the true essence of iaido can be seen only when your blade rests within its scabbard.”

“I’ve never met anyone who uses their power more frivolously than you do...” muttered Tomoyo. And, I mean, yeah, fair.

I was in the habit of rejoicing in *Dark and Dark*’s pitch-black glow three times a day, like clockwork. I couldn’t fall asleep without manifesting its tenebrous flames at least once before bed. I was as frivolous with it as I could possibly be. My black flames were just about as devalued as Super Saiyans were toward the end of *Dragon Ball*’s serialization.

“*True* power remains as potent as ever no matter how haphazardly you use it—if anything, such use only makes it stronger! Indeed, it’s just like how a long-standing unagi restaurant’s special sauce grows deeper and deeper in flavor as time marches by!”

“That was an *awful* metaphor.” Yeah. Gotta agree with that one too.

Moving along, though, I was seriously shocked. Tomoyo, of all people, was a secret chuuni! She’d dropped a hint or two here and there in the past, but I never imagined she was *that* deep into it. The simulation she’d been running had some serious oomph to it too! Enough so that I’d totally forgotten everything I’d been thinking of just a minute—

“Gaaahhh?!” *Crap! I’ve totally forgotten how my super fancy rework of the Malediction of Unleashing went!* “Dang it, Tomoyo, what’s wrong with you?! You made me forget my brand new Malediction!”

“That’s not *my* fault, and I don’t give a crap anyway!”

“Gaaah... C’mon, how’d it go...? All I can remember is that I somehow managed to cut it down to two chaoses in total...”

“Two’s still too much chaos.”

“Man, I should’ve written it down! Inspiration struck me like a bolt of lightning, but alas, lightning never strikes twice, and I may never recall that

momentary stroke of brilliance…" I fell into an unfathomably deep depression.

Damnations! I can't let this end here! I desperately scoured my memories, trying to put myself back in the moment when inspiration had taken me.

Umm, okay—I was super bored in class, so I decided to kill some time by reading my electronic dictionary's definition of "Apocalypse." So, that was great, and I ended up grinning, but then the girl who sits next to me snickered, and I got all paranoid and thought, "Oh, crap, she's laughing at me!" Then I totally failed to learn from experience and looked up "Genesis" next…

"Hey, Tomoyo, could you let me use your computer for a sec?" I figured that if I looked up "Genesis" again, it might set off a chain of association that could help me remember the Malediction. I reached for her laptop, which had been sitting open on the table since I'd arrived.

"N-Noooooo!"

"Gaaah!" I screamed as Tomoyo slammed the laptop shut right on my fingers. I had a sudden and intense empathy for animals that get caught in bear traps. "Ouch, jeez… What the heck was that for?"

"What do you mean what was it for?! You're the one who was about to snoop around in my computer without permission!"

"Huh? But we all borrow your computer all the time!"

"Yeah, *after* I say it's okay! Which it is, now. Go ahead," she said, spinning the laptop around to face me. The screen displayed her perfectly blank desktop with its perfectly unassuming background—a picture of a lake.

"What, have to close all your porn tabs first?"

"Don't lump me in with you, jackass!"

Hmm. What is *she hiding, then?* I was pretty curious, but it wouldn't exactly be polite to try to probe into her secrets. Besides, at the moment, the Malediction took priority.

"Now then, my good friend Google—let us voyage forth on a journey to uncover my lost memories!"

"Less talking, more typing!"

With the power of Google on my side, I somehow managed to remember the Malediction of Unleashing well enough to piece it back together. The rest of the literary club's members happened to arrive right around the time I was finishing up. Hatoko, Chifuyu, and Sayumi all filed in to join me and Tomoyo.

"Thanks for the computer time, Tomoyo."

"Sure. So, did you remember it?"

"Yeah! Though, I mean, 'remember' might not be quite the right word. It's more like, y'know…like it struck me, or came to me in a revelation."

"Oh, come *on*."

“Oh, and I ended up coming up with another title while I was thinking it through, so it all worked out in the end.”

“You really need to stop making up titles for yourself. Like, please, just stop. It’s painful to watch,” said Tomoyo, who had turned slightly pale the second I said the word “title.” I ignored her and pulled a black notebook out from my bag. A deep dark, *jet*-black notebook.

“Oh god, it’s the cringe compilation!”

“No it’s not! It’s the *Bloody Bible*!”

The *Bloody Bible*: a forbidden tome within which the ultimate truth of the world itself is laid bare!

“Andou…” began Tomoyo, “please, just this once, take my advice: take that book and burn it, now. If you don’t, you’re going to end up looking back on it someday and passing out from sheer horror.”

She wasn’t taking a jab at me that time; it felt more like a serious and genuine warning. I ignored her anyway, though, and started inscribing the new and improved Malediction of Unleashing into the *Bloody Bible*, along with the new title I’d thought up. *I’ve gone and done it again! Yet another sinful name to add to my collection.*

“Ah, Juu, wasn’t I with you when you bought that notebook?” piped up Hatoko, sliding into the conversation. “That takes me back! It was about a year ago, right? We searched through five shops in a row before we found just the right one for you! You kept asking each and every worker we found if they had any black notebooks in stock.”

As Hatoko enthusiastically recounted her story, I could feel Tomoyo’s gaze growing colder and colder as she stared at me.

“What? No way! What’re you saying, Hatoko? I found this, y’know, like, *Death Note* style! It just fell at my feet out of nowhere one day.”

“Then you colored all the white lines on the cover red, and then you colored the part where you’re supposed to write your name black only to write your name over *that* with a white-out pen in the end! You’ve always been really crafty like that.”

“No, that’s not… Ah, fine, I give up.”

Tomoyo was looking at me like she’d look at a pile of human waste, and I was too busy shrinking away from her to argue.

I looked down at the *Bloody Bible* once more. The red lines running through its black cover shone like a blood-red moon in the middle of the night sky—they were seriously cool as hell. I’d also written “Bloody Bible” in warped, distorted letters in the place where you’re supposed to write a school subject. (In English, of course. Honestly, I worked pretty hard on making it look just right.)

I’d also written my true name, Guiltia Sin Jurai, just below. I’d wanted to do all of the writing on the cover in the same foreign language, but I’d invented the name “Guiltia” myself and couldn’t for the life of me figure out how it would be spelled in English. In the end, I was forced to give in and write that part out phonetically in Japanese characters.

As I was gazing at the *Bloody Bible*, Chifuyu walked over to me. “Andou,” she said in a reproachful tone, “you shouldn’t play around with your notebooks.”

“You have it all wrong, Chifuyu! This isn’t a notebook; it’s the *Bloody Bible*!”

She just stared at me.

“Right, okay, I’m sorry. I was playing around with my notebook. I won’t do it again, so please, forgive me!”

“Very good.” She nodded with satisfaction as I admitted defeat. The pressure of her innocent stare was just too much for me. *Damnations! I’ve always been powerless in the face of a sound argument presented in a straightforward manner!*

“Hmm? Hey, Andou, about this part,” said Tomoyo, pointing at the part of the notebook where I’d written *Bloody Bible* in English. It looked ridiculously stylish, so I could imagine why it’d grab her attention.

“You spelled ‘Bible’ wrong.”

“I…what?”

“Bible’s spelled B-I-B-L-E. You spelled it V-I-V-R-E.”

I glanced nervously at the lettering, and oh god, she was right. There it was, *Bloody Vivre*, written in nice, big, easily readable letters.

Huh? Wait. Huh?

A chaotic storm of thoughts rampaged through my head. I was in such a panic I totally forgot to tease Tomoyo for knowing how “Bible” was spelled and insinuate that it meant she was a secret chuuni.

But no, wait a second! “S-S-Sayumi!” I shouted, rounding on our club president and storming up to her. “I-I asked you how to spell ‘Bible’ in English that one time, right?! And you told me it was spelled V-I-V-R-E, didn’t you?!”

“Pfft!” After just a few seconds of questioning, she caved, letting out a half-suppressed laugh. Apparently, she couldn’t hold in her mirth any longer; her shoulders were quivering, and she refused to look me in the eye.

“I-I’m so sorry! He he he! I m-must have accidentally taught you…the wrong… Pff, ha ha ha ha!” She was outright cracking up at that point, enjoying every second of it. I could tell just from watching her back shudder.

All right, that settles it—she definitely taught me the wrong spelling on purpose! She’s probably been laughing it up internally every single time I pulled out my notebook! What an absolute sadist!

“Andou,” said Tomoyo, “this says ‘Vivre.’ *Bloody Vivre*. Like the name of the shopping center, y’know? Why on earth would a shopping mall get covered in blood?”

“Ah, now that you mention it, didn’t you get that notebook from a stationery store in the Vivre by the station, Juu? This almost feels like fate!” added Hatoko.

Between Hatoko's carefree banter and Tomoyo's ridicule, I was driven to the ground, falling prone on my face.

How could you, Sayumi? How could you...? There was no hope for recovery—if I tried to scribble out the "Vivre" part with a black marker, it'd definitely end up looking super weird. *What the hell's a "Bloody Vivre" supposed to be...?*

I fell into a deep depression for a while, but since nobody bothered to try to cheer me up, I eventually perked back up on my own. Not like it really matters that much—I can just say that in the world I'm originally from, they spell it "Vivre" instead of "Bible." The JoJo in Part Five got to be called GioGio instead just because it was set in Italy, so there's precedent for this sorta thing!

All that said...why is it that nobody in this club ever tries to comfort me when I'm depressed? Have they figured out that I always bounce back perfectly well on my own if you just leave me alone for a while? I decided to stop thinking about it and returned to my seat to flip through the Bloody Bible.

A little while later, a topic for a new conversation occurred to me. "By the way, everyone—what're all of your titles?"

The overall mood of the room shifted suddenly and dramatically. "Andou," began Sayumi (who had finally managed to stop laughing) in a sort of chiding tone, "I don't appreciate the way your question implies that it's a given that we would all have 'titles.'"

"Wait, what?! You can't mean—you *don't*?!"

"As it so happens, most people don't."

"Huh... I guess that must mean I'm a truly unique and extraordinary individual after all."

"You could certainly say that. To begin with, is a title really something you're supposed to think up for yourself?"

Sayumi was absolutely right, and I knew it. I didn't have any hope of arguing against that point, so I turned to the others and changed the topic.

"All right, let's have a show of hands. Who here has a title for themselves?"

Nobody raised their hands. Yeah, sorta saw that coming...

"Okay then, who here doesn't understand what I mean by 'title'?"

That time, precisely one person raised her hand, that person being Chifuyu.

"Huh? You know what it means, Hatoko?" I asked. That was sort of a surprise. I'd been under the impression that Hatoko was totally out of the loop when it came to this stuff.

"I do," she replied. "Titles are like nicknames, right?"

Hmm. That's not exactly wrong, but I feel like there's a bit of a difference in nuance. I was having a hard time figuring out how to reply, but Sayumi jumped in to do it for me.

“If I had to give an example of a title most people would be familiar with, I’d pick something from the world of sports. Take the volleyball team ‘the Oriental Witches,’ or how Kazuhiro Sasaki was called ‘Daimajin’ by his fans. Teams and athletes are assigned titles surprisingly often.”

“Manga use stuff like ‘the Witch,’ or ‘the Ice Queen,’ or ‘the God of Death’ all the time,” added Tomoyo. “Those three are such cliches at this point that you can use them without getting accused of ripping them off from anything specific. Especially ‘the Witch of X’—I seriously can’t count how many variations on that structure I’ve seen.”

Their explanations were nice and straightforward, and Hatoko clapped her hands in understanding. “Oh, I get it! Like ‘the Comedy Craftsmen of the Heisei Era,’ or ‘the Wizards of Words,’ right?”

Those examples were two of her favorite comedy duos. You wouldn’t think it, but Hatoko was really into comedians on the whole. She watched a super long-running comedy show called *Shoten* on a weekly basis, and she actually cried when the M-1 Grand Prix comedy competition went off the air.

“All right, sounds like we’re all on the same page! In that case, let’s use today to think up titles for ourselves!” I suggested, proposing an excellent idea with impeccable timing.

“No.”

“Absolutely not.”

“No way.”

“Booo.”

A storm of complaints blew in, but I was prepared to weather it! I reached into my pocket and pulled out a single coin—and not one of your everyday hundred-yen coins or arcade tokens either. It was a coin from some foreign country with the face of some ancient emperor printed on it. Why not a Japanese coin? ’Cause foreign coins are cooler, obviously!

“Come on, now—have you all forgotten the literary club’s time-tested rule? When a disagreement arises, we let the coin decide!”

Everyone gave me a “we’ve never had a rule like that” sort of look, but I ignored them and gave the coin a mighty flip! It traced a parabola through the air like a graph charting $y=-1x^2$ until I caught it again and slapped it onto the back of my left hand. I’d spent *hours* practicing that move at home, and it had finally paid off!

I very slowly pulled away my right hand, revealing the Goddess of Fate’s judgment to all and sundry.

“Tails.”

The tails side of the coin had what looked like some sort of ancient temple printed on it. It was unmistakably tails; everyone came over to look and agreed. Tails for sure. Then, all at once, the four of them looked at me and spoke in unison.

“So?”

So…? Oh. Crap.

I forgot to call it! What should I do?! Oh jeez, I can tell they're pitying me from the looks on their faces! Help me, O Goddess of Fate!

As a drop of cold sweat slowly traced its way down my back, Tomoyo jumped in and said, "Y'know what, forget about the coin," brushing the whole incident off. *I seriously love the way she always manages to be considerate when it really counts.* "Aren't you supposed to earn titles naturally? Like, the people around you start calling you them, and if they stick, they become a title. You're not supposed to think them up yourself."

I mean, she wasn't wrong when it came to the actual fictional worlds where titles get used. In reality, though, all those titles were thought up by the author, usually at great length. I decided against contributing that bit of insight to the conversation, though.

"And, like, we already have our power names," she continued. "Can't those just work as our titles? Y'know, like 'Accelerator' or 'Railgun.'"

"I mean, sure, that *works*. But wouldn't you rather have a bunch of titles?"

"No. Look, it's not that I have something against titles on a basic level. I just don't wanna think them up for myself."

"C'mon, why're you being so stubborn about this, Tomoyo? Am I touching a nerve from a dark spot in your past?"

"O-Of course you aren't, jackass!"

I was just kidding, but Tomoyo really freaked out in response. I figured that meant she really *had* spent a good bit of time thinking up titles for herself at some point in the past. *She's definitely a former chuuni, no doubt about it.*

"Now, now, Tomoyo, no need to fret. If you don't want to think up your own title, then I'll come up with the perfect one for you!"

"*Don't!* What kind of guy gives a girl a title?! That'd be the most messed-up present ever!"

"Huh? Wait, you wouldn't be happy if someone gave you a title?"

"There isn't a single girl on this planet who *would* be!"

For real? But when the protagonist of that basketball comedy light novel I read the other day gave girls titles as presents, they were over the moon for it... Anyway, talking to Tomoyo seemed like a dead end, so I decided to shift over and attempt to persuade a certain elementary schooler who was busy spacing out instead.

"Hey, Chifuyu."

"What?"

"Wanna try thinking up some titles?"

"Is that fun?"

"*Super* fun!"

"Okay then."

Persuasion complete. I could feel the other members rolling their eyes at me, but I was cool with that. In our club, Chifuyu had the absolute last word

over everyone else—in other words, as long as I could get her on my side, I didn't have to worry about the others at all.

And so, we all began a new club activity: thinking up our titles!

While the others moaned, groaned, and begrudgingly opened up their notebooks, I went over to the whiteboard and prepared to formally raise the curtain on my lecture, which I'd decided to call "Titles, Pseudonyms, and Aliases: Multiple Names for the Absolute Beginner." I began my lesson, trying as best as I could to affect the tone of some esteemed professor.

"Now then! There are a number of patterns that can be used to create a title. Let's start with a basic example—among the many varieties of title, some can be split neatly into two segments. In my world, we refer to these as the 'agent' and the 'modifier.'"

"What world would *that* be?" jabbed Tomoyo, but I ignored her and started scribbling out a series of words on the whiteboard.

"Witch" "God of Death" "Queen" "King" "Ruler" "Scion" "Mage" "Jester"

"As you can see, these are some examples of more commonly found agents. As for modifiers..."

"Crimson" "Dark" "Stygian" "Golden" "Forbidden" "of Chaos" "of Strife" "Forgotten" "Destined" "Splendorous"

"Something along these lines, essentially. As you can see, modifiers trend quite heavily toward words that evoke colors! Now then, let's try putting it all together—we'll select an agent, then we'll apply a modifier to it!"

I proceeded to write "The Dark King" on the whiteboard.

"Yes, that should do nicely. Wonderful, isn't it? It simply *exudes* an air of corruption, of solitude! If this were the name of a member of a team of villains, you could say with absolute certainty that he would be the last one to take the stage!"

"I'd say it exudes the stench of chuuni garbage," groaned Tomoyo.

Nope, ignoring that. C'mon, Tomoyo, I'm having a moment here.

"'The Dark King' would be a perfectly functional title as is, but I believe it could be improved upon with just a little modification! Think of it like cooking: it only takes a little bit of effort to add some seasoning, and that extra effort can deepen the flavor of your dish like nothing else! Now then. Hatoko?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Wonderful response! I can tell that you're ready to give us a demonstration. Please step up to the whiteboard and give this title your own special twist."

"Umm... 'My own twist'? What do you mean, Professor Juu?"

“Oh, it’s very simple—just think up a way to rephrase this title in your own words, then write it out! Give it that extra dash of spice!”

Hatoko spent a moment pondering her options, then took up her marker and wrote “King of Darkness” on the whiteboard.

“Finished! Look, look—how’s that, Juu? You love names like this, right?”

I let out a long, exaggerated sigh. “Alas! I’m disappointed in you, Hatoko.”

“Whoa, you went back to talking all dramatically!”

“I’m just that disappointed! Tell me, Hatoko—what exactly have you learned over the past seventeen years of your life?”

“I’ve studied all sorts of things, really,” said Hatoko, pursing her lips in a dissatisfied frown.

I shook my head. *Really, now. She doesn’t understand a thing.* I erased her “*King of Darkness*” and wrote my own title in its place: “Lord of Thanatos”

“*This* is the correct answer, and it also happens to be one of my own innumerable titles.” “King” struck me as a little childish, so I went with “Lord” instead. “Dark,” meanwhile, was swapped out for “Thanatos,” the Greek god of death. Implying, but not outright stating, the darkness theme is what really pulled it together.

God damn that’s cool. Seriously, “Thanatos” sounds cool as hell.

Hatoko moaned with despair. “Tomoyooo,” she cried, “I don’t understand anything at all anymore…”

“There, there, it’s okay. *You’re* not the one in the wrong here,” Tomoyo assured her.

I decided to let the two of them go flirt in a corner or whatever and returned to my lecture, once again assuming my pseudo-professor persona.

“Returning to agents for a moment, using your actual name can be a valid technique as well. Take, for instance, a man named Tanaka. He could use his own name as the agent and ‘Gale’ as the modifier to make ‘Tanaka of the Gales.’”

Though, actually…on second thought, “Tanaka” sorta spoils the effect of the whole thing. It’s not even slightly cool. For that matter, Japanese names might not work super well for this in general…

“But, well, of course, this technique works best with a name that already sounds a little exotic! ‘Raoul of the Gales,’ for instance, or ‘Leo the Incandescent.’ Some famous examples of this format would be ‘Straw Hat Luffy’ and ‘White Chase Smoker.’ Now then, Chifuyu?”

“What?”

“Tell me: can you think of any examples of this sort of title you’ve seen out in the real world?”

“Arrietty the Borrower.”

“Not *quite* there yet.”

“Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea.”

“Right, okay. Let’s take a step away from Studio Ghibli, shall we?”

“Kiyomori of the Taira.”

“Right, for the record, not everything that fits the ‘agent’ plus ‘modifier’ pattern works properly. ‘Taira’ was Kiyomori’s family name, not a title.”

“Andou the Dummy.”

“All right, yes, that’s the best one so—hey! Who’re you calling a dummy?!”

“Titles are complicated,” muttered Chifuyu. We’d wrapped up that bit nicely with a concluding joke, so I decided to get things back on track.

“When all’s said and done, you don’t have to fixate too much on the agent/modifier structure! It’s just that, in the end—a structure, a framework to help you along your way. You can get by just fine ignoring it entirely. For instance, here’s an example that I just came up with off the cuff.” I wrote “King of the Lions” on the whiteboard.

“Ah, yes, now this is a title!” I fall a little more in love with my own naming sense each passing day.

I’d thought up that title just a little while beforehand. It had all the implicit savagery of a wild jungle beast, but at the same time, that sinister tone was held in check by the inescapable association with a certain famous musical.

“This is another option: subtly invoke the name of a timeless masterpiece to elevate your own title! Consider, for instance, the Stands in JoJo and how often their names are pulled from foreign media.”

“Hey,” whined Hatoko, “if ‘King of Darkness’ is bad, then why’s ‘King of the Lions’ okay? They’re both kings, aren’t they?”

“There’s a certain sense for these things. You just have to have a *feel* for it.”

“Hmph! I don’t get it at all!” she grumbled. I couldn’t blame her—it really was a matter of a name just *feeling* right or wrong, and that’s not exactly the easiest thing to explain convincingly. “King of Darkness” definitely felt wrong, in any case.

Anyway, I was getting pretty tired of the professor act and was just about out of stuff to talk about, so I decided to move into the wrap-up phase of the lesson. “All right, everyone. I’ve explained a lot today, but when all is said and done, what’s most important are your own feelings. There are no hard and fast rules for titles and aliases! Shed your restraints and fly free!”

I drew my lecture to the sort of conclusion you’d expect from an obnoxiously self-satisfied art teacher. I could tell that the others were thinking something along the lines of “If there are no hard and fast rules, then what was the point of that whole lesson?” from the looks in their eyes. Honestly, that last part was just me making crap up for the sake of a nice wrap-up.

I gave everyone some time to write down a few ideas, then I started walking around to see what they’d all come up with. First up was Hatoko.

“Heh heh, I’m pretty proud of these!” She grinned as she started reading out the titles she’d written down. “One: ‘Hatoko the Red.’”

“By the book much?!” She’d somehow found a way to do the exact opposite of putting my lecture into practical use!

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it? You said that colors make for good modifiers, right?”

“That doesn’t mean you can just slap a color on your name and call it a day! ‘Hatoko the Red’ makes no sense!”

“Well, ‘Lord of Thanatos’ doesn’t make sense either!”

“Ugh…” I couldn’t argue with that. To be totally honest, it’s pretty common for titles to prioritize “being cool” over “making sense” and end up pretty meaningless as a result. Tons of stories end up falling into that trap. Yeah, hot take, I know.

“Anyway, number one’s vetoed. Next!”

“Two: ‘Hatoko the Blue.’”

“That’s the same friggin’ thing!”

“Whaaat? But the first ten titles I came up with are all color-based!”

“*Why*?! What are you, a pack of colored pencils?!”

“Hmm… I don’t think that comeback landed very well, Juu.”

“You’ve got pretty high standards when it comes to comedy, don’t you?”

“Ah, that’s it! I just had a great idea! I’m sure you’ll like this one!”

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“Eleven: ‘Hatoko the Bright Red.’”

“That’s *still* the same friggin’ thing! This isn’t a comedy sketch; you don’t have to follow the rule of threes!”

“Wait, what? Did I do it three times…? Oh, no, I’m so embarrassed!”

“You sound pretty happy about it to me.” I guess she was pleased about having used a comedic repetition technique entirely by accident. *Sheesh.* “For crying out loud—how many times are you planning on making the same mistake? What are you, the history of humanity?!”

“Oooh, now *that* was a good comeback!”

“Wait, for real?”

“Yeah, yeah! A little touch of dark humor works wonders!”

Mwa ha ha! Apparently, I’ve leveled up my comeback skill over the course of this conversation. Having a moment of personal growth mid-battle’s hella cool of me. “You’d better keep training, Hatoko, or I’ll be leaving your comebacks in the dust in no time!”

“Yeah! Okay, next is eleven: ‘Hatoko of the Heisei Era’!”

“Yeah, I get it, cause that’s when you were born. Rejected.”

“Twelve: ‘Hatoko of the Showa Era.’”

“Changing the era doesn’t help. Rejected.”

“Thirteen: ‘Delayed Comeback Hatoko.’”

“What, like, the comedy thing where you play along with the joke for a second before you shut it down? No way you could pull that off.”

“Whaaat, that’s not true! Of course I can—yeah, right! As if I could!”

“Wait, you just pulled it off by saying you *can’t* pull it off?! What kinda paradox is that?!”

“He he he! See, I did it! That settles it. My title’s ‘Delayed Comeback Hatoko’!” The overpowering innocence of her smile was too much for me, and I couldn’t bring myself to argue against it. *Hmm. That’ll do, I guess. She likes it, and that’s what really matters.*

Hatoko’s title was settled for the moment, so I moved on to my next student: Sayumi.

“I can’t say I’m especially confident about mine,” she declared as I approached. You’d almost think she was being modest if it weren’t for the aura of intense self-assurance she was exuding at the same time.

“One: ‘Sleet White.’”

“Oh, not bad!” A slight twist on Snow White—I’d expect no less from Sayumi. She always made it seem like she could do anything, so of course she’d produce a textbook example of a solid title.

“I also thought the classic name would work in and of itself, without alteration, so I have number two: ‘Snow White.’”

“Ooh, nice! Sometimes keeping it simple really is the way to go.”

“My third might be somewhat played out, but three: ‘Maiden of Iron.’”

“Yeah, it’s kinda cliché, but I wouldn’t rule it out.” “Iron Maiden” had been used all over the place, but by switching around the word order she not only gave it more of an original feel, but also de-emphasized the torture connotations and brought the prim and proper feel of the word “maiden” into the forefront. Very nice.

“Four: ‘Sleeping Beauty.’ Though I suppose this one would fit Chifuyu more than it does me.”

“Yeah, that one suits her a bit more.”

“Five: ‘Songstress of Strife.’”

“That’s great too! Honestly, I can’t complain about any of those. I knew I could count on you to come up with some good titles!”

“Well, thank you kindly.”

“You might even have the same sorta naming style I do!”

“Andou? I appreciate that you intended that to be a compliment, but coming from you, it’s hard not to hear it as an insult—a grave one, at that. Grave enough that you could be brought up on slander charges,” she said, casually slandering me.

She really did seem omni-talented. She had a billion interests, was a certifiable genius, and no matter how unreasonable a task you demanded of her, she’d always find a way to go above and beyond in accomplishing it. If I absolutely *had* to find something to nitpick, though…

“Princess names, ‘maiden,’ ‘songstress’—all of your titles are really girly, aren’t they?”

“Huh…?” Sayumi’s expression suddenly grew stiff.

“I mean, I sorta had this image of you being really mature, so I thought you’d pick something with ‘witch’ or ‘queen’ in it. I was just a little surprised you went for the cute side of the spectrum instead.”

“Th-The cute side…?”

“Are you actually really into princesses and stuff like that? I guess that’d mean you have a childish side to you after all!”

“Hiyah!”

With a sudden shout, Sayumi shot forward, grabbed my arm, and twisted it into a lock with a single polished movement.

“Gyaaahhh!”

“Please quiet down. It’s not that bad—I just dislocated it.”

“I think that’s pretty bad, actually! You can’t just pop arms in and out of their sockets in real life! Gaaahhh! Oh god, my shouldeeer!”

“Your shoulder is fine. I fixed it with *Route of Origin* an instant after I dislocated it. The pain should have only lasted a moment.”

“Huh…? Oh, hey, you’re right.” I swung my arm around a bit, and it didn’t hurt at all. It felt great, actually.

She could attack me and heal me a mere moment later, inflicting all the pain she wanted without leaving any actual injuries… *Route of Origin* was truly a power to be feared. Also, she was scarily good at using it. *When’d you figure that trick out, Sayumi?*

“Really now. You brought that upon yourself by getting too big for your boots and talking down to an upperclassman,” said Sayumi, sounding a little sullen. I wasn’t actually trying to talk down to her at all, for what it’s worth. “I’d appreciate it if you’d keep in mind that we don’t *have* to play along with this farce of yours. We’re only doing so out of the goodness of our hearts.”

“Right… Sorry. So, umm, which title are you going with?”

“I don’t even care anymore,” she said, refusing to look me in the eye. Apparently, I’d spoiled her mood, though I couldn’t begin to imagine how.

It would’ve felt like a waste to not pick a name after all that, though, so I decided to be persistent. “Come on, please, just pick one! I don’t even care what it is!”

“In that case, I’ll go with ‘Cutie Sayumi the Adorable Angel.’”

So, yeah. She wasn’t even trying anymore.

Considering how deeply offended she was acting, I decided that further negotiations with Sayumi were off the table and moved on to my next student: Chifuyu.

“I did my best!” she exclaimed as she passed me her notebook. I took a look at her first title: “Strawberry the Orange.”

“That’s, umm…yeah.” Hoo boy. What can I say about this? The only word that comes to mind is “surreal”! It looks more like a typo than a title!

“Andou? How is it?”

“Umm, it’s… Errr… I mean, it’s good, I guess? Does it, like, have some hidden meaning?”

“You said our feelings are what’s important, so I wrote about the things I like.”

“Oh. And you like strawberries and oranges.”

“Yeah.”

“Right… Hmm. This is a *little* bit off. How to put it…?”

“You said we should fly free, Andou.”

“That... That I did...”

“But this is bad? It’s wrong?”

She stared at me, her gaze pure and unblemished, and I couldn’t spit it out. I just couldn’t. *Crap. After all that talk about following your feelings, I* can’t *criticize her for this!*

With no better options available, I resorted to praise. “No, it’s fine. It’s great! You’re a genius!”

That definitely cheered her up, and Chifuyu moved on to her next title idea: “Strawberry Daifuku the Orange and Orange.”

“Why’d you put two oranges in?!”

“I wanted to do it like your *Dark and Dark*.”

Gaaah! Again, I can’t argue with that! She totally had the wrong idea, though. There’s a really deep, lore-rich reason why *Dark and Dark* needs two darks, I swear!

“‘The Ruler of Eating Lots of Strawberry Daifuku.’”

“Right. Great. Thanks for listening so carefully to my lecture.”

“‘The Orange Hero.’”

“You might’ve been onto something if you’d gone with ‘The Green Hero,’ at least.” Considering she was a little kid, it’s only natural she’d be a *green* hero, after all. “Hey, Chifuyu, did you think up any titles that *don’t* involve fruit?”

“Yeah,” said Chifuyu, pointing a ways down the page and out of the fruit zone. “‘Mom the Dad.’”

“Sounds like a pretty complicated family, huh?”

“I love my mom and my dad, so I put them both in.”

“That’s *great*, and I’m glad to hear it! Having a loving family’s just the best! Nothing better!”

“‘Old Mom the Mean.’”

“‘Old’? As in she’s old, or... What happened between you and your mom?!”

“‘Dad the Suspiciously Late Coming Home.’”

“He’s probably not doing anything bad! He’s just really busy at work! I bet they’re making him do overtime!”

“‘Dad’s Coworker the Homewrecker.’”

“I’m sure they’re just friends! Believe in your dad, Chifuyu! And, look, that’s enough of the family relationships series, okay? Let’s move on to the next topic.”

“‘Honey the Bear.’”

“Right... It’s cute, so that works.”

“‘Mister Panda the Monochromatic.’”

“The second part sounds super cool, at least!”

“‘Flightlessly Winged the Penguin.’”

“And this time the first half’s the cool part!”

“Oh, and then there’s—”

“I get it, I get it. That’s enough of the animal series.” I heaved a sigh. I’d sort of seen this coming; Chifuyu didn’t understand what a title was on a fundamental level.

Not that there was any reason why she *would* understand it. She was an elementary schooler, after all. A certain level of emotional maturity is necessary to fully appreciate the exquisite harmony of text, subtext, and pure aesthetic that goes into these things. That’s right—you have to be at least as emotionally mature as I am!

“Thanks for putting so much thought into this, Chifuyu. Think you can wrap it up by picking the title you like the best?”

“Hmm…” Chifuyu crossed her arms and pondered her options, kicking her legs in the air and causing Squirrely’s tail to sort of wag in the process. A minute later, she pointed at one of the names in her notebook and declared “This one.”

“Sweet and Sour Pineapple”

For a moment, I was speechless. It was far and away the most surreal title yet. It was so out there, it almost circled all the way around and had a nice ring to it. I was starting to think that Chifuyu might’ve been way ahead of her time.

“That one? You’re really sure about that?”

“I love the pineapple chunks in sweet and sour pork.”

“Okaaay…?”

“So my mom always makes me sweet and sour pork with just pineapple in it.”

That wouldn’t even count as sweet and sour pork anymore! And besides, the whole point of putting the pineapple in is that it has enzymes in it that break down the pork and make it more tender! Your mom’s putting the cart way before the horse!

“From now on, you should call me *Sweet and Sour Pineapple*,” Chifuyu declared triumphantly. As usual, I couldn’t follow her train of thought in the slightest.

That more or less settled Chifuyu’s title for the time being, so I moved on to the next person. So far, the exercise had been going even less well than I’d imagined it would. They just weren’t, well, I dunno… I guess their chuuni power levels were lacking, on the whole. Their titles were all missing that vital element of soul that pulls it all together. I realize that it’s wrong to assume that everyone has the same standards and desires that I do, but still…

Deeply conflicted, I arrived at the literary club’s final frontier. “If you’re gonna make us do this, you could at least hurry it up,” grunted Tomoyo, thrusting out her notebook as I walked up to her.

“The Witch of Antimony Who Smirks in the Face of Twilight: *Endless Paradox*”

I was dumbstruck.

“I-I didn’t put that much thought into it or anything!” she quickly clarified. “I just took bits of advice from your lecture and used them to come up with the most chuuni thing I could think of, since I figured that was what you wanted!”

Sorry, still speechless.

“A-And I didn’t write it cause I wanted to! This *definitely* isn’t a title I came up with a long time ago, or anything!”

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“Tomoyo.”

“Wh-What?”

“You win.”

“Win what?!”

“I have nothing left to teach you. All the secrets of the art are at your beck and call.”

“I don’t want them!”

“Master…”

“Don’t call me that! And why do you look so jealous?! It’s weird!”

“Master…”

“Don’t italicize it!”

“Never forget though, Tomoyo: the path of the chuuni is never-ending! Never fall into the trap of complacency! Never let yourself believe you’ve reached the peak of your craft!”

“I was never walking that path to begin with! Which role are you even trying to play anyway? My master or my student?”

“Your comrade in arms!”

“I’m not your comrade in *anything*!”

“Wh-What?! Her chuuni power level—it’s over nine thousaaand!”

“Put away the imaginary scouter!”

“I can’t see the limit of her chuuni level! If I used Hakoware on her, how long would it take for her to go bankrupt?!”

“You’re saying my chuuni level’s Menthuthuyoupi-tier?!”

For the first time in my life, I, Guiltia Sin Jurai, was shaken to the core of my being. I was experiencing true dread, absolute despair…and all I could do was weep hopelessly in the face of her awesome might.

“Oh god, don’t *cry*! Quit it with the teeth-chattering! Who do you think I am, Frieza?!” As usual, Tomoyo was quick with a snappy and topical comeback.

Seriously, though, all joking aside, “The Witch of Antimony Who Smirks in the Face of Twilight: *Endless Paradox*” kicked *ass*. I was especially impressed by her choice to go with “smirks” instead of the more played-out “smiles.” “Twilight” instead of something like “dark of night” was an inspired choice I could get behind, as well. And above all else, “Antimony.”

Seriously, “antimony”! Bad. *Ass*.

“And so, allow me to announce the winner of the literary club’s very first title contest! First place: *Closed Clock*: Kanzaki Tomoyo, with the title ‘The Witch of Antimony Who Smirks in the Face of Twilight: *Endless Paradox*’!”

“Since when was this a contest?!” protested Tomoyo.

“Let’s give her a round of applause, everyone!” A smattering of cheers and polite applause ensued.

“You people are going along with it?!” cried Tomoyo incredulously at the other members.

I was actually sorta shocked they played along too, but after a moment's thought, I realized it made sense. Hatoko loved to jump in on the action when everyone was getting excited about something, Sayumi loved teasing people, and Chifuyu…didn't understand what was going on and was just going with the flow, most likely.

As long as we're screwing around, I decided, *I might as well pull out all the stops and screw around at full power!* "Being the victor of our contest, Kanzaki Tomoyo has earned herself the privilege of being called by her title for a full week, starting tomorrow!"

"I think when you say 'privilege,' you mean 'punishment'!"

"Now then, Miss *Endless Paradox*, would you care to share a comment on your achievement today?"

"I thought you said starting tomorrow! And a comment…? Not particularly, no."

"The judges were particularly enthusiastic about the use of the word 'antimony' in your title's preamble! You scored an awful lot of points with that word!"

"*What* judges? You picked the winner unilaterally."

"Antimony… What a wonderful word! It resonates with my very soul! Please, tell us—what hidden volumes of meaning are packed into that one simple little word?"

"No, I mean… I d-didn't really mean it to be that deep or anything, and I don't know if I could, like, define it… I just thought it sounded s-sorta cool, so…"

"Miss *Endless Paradox*, do you mean to say that you used a word you don't actually understand in your own title's preamble?"

Tomoyo hesitated for a moment, then she finally spit out a reluctant "Yeah."

"Oooh? Hmmm. I see!"

"Yeah, laugh it up, jerkwad! If you've got something to say, then say it to my face!"

"Thank you for your most enlightening comments, Miss *Endless Paradox*! Let's have one more round of applause for our victor, everyone!"

"Hurray!" cheered the other members.

"Again, why are you people going along with this?!" screamed Tomoyo. "Am I the only one who thinks this is weird?!"

"All right, everyone, all together now!" I declared. "Endless! Endless!"

"*Endless! Endless!*" cheered the others.

"What kind of messed up chant is that?!" wailed Tomoyo.

"Paradox! Paradox!"

"Paradox! Paradox!"

"Antimony! Antimony!"

"Antimony! Antimony!"

"Antimony! Antimony!"

"Antimony! Antimony!"

“Why’re you still stuck on Antimony?!”

“Antimony! Antimony!”

“Antimony! Antimony!”

“Please, stop! Just stooop!”

And so, the curtain fell on our club’s first title contest. All I can say is, well…y’know. Another good day today. Nice and fulfilling. Yup.

The time for club activities came to a close, and five schoolchildren strode through the twilight-stained streets.

The Lord of Thanatos (one title of many).

Delayed Comeback Hatoko.

Cutie Sayumi the Adorable Angel.

Sweet and Sour Pineapple.

And Endless Paradox.

Sooo, yeah, this was a complete and utter failure. There’s only so much surrealism I can take before I have to call the whole thing a wash. Everyone already has the transcendentally awesome power names I came up with for them, so maybe it’d be best to go in the “power names = titles” direction after all.

“Hey, *Endless Paradox*,” I said, turning to Tomoyo.

No reply.

“Heeey, don’t ignore me, *Endless Paradox*!”

Silence.

“I know you can hear me, *Endless Paradox*!”

“Quit calling me that!” Tomoyo rounded on me and roared with fiery fury. “I swear to god, Andou, try teasing me one more time and I will *flip*!”

“What’re you talking about?! I’m not teasing you! I seriously think you’ve got an incredible knack for names!” I meant it too. That was a genuine attempt at a compliment on my part.

I wouldn’t have been calling her *Endless Paradox* in the first place if I didn’t think it was an awesome title! Making fun of *that* would be madness! Though I do have to admit that I personally preferred my titles to be more on the short and snappy side of the spectrum. The full version of her title dragged on a bit long in my book, but that was just a matter of taste.

“I’d rather you *were* making fun of me if that’s the alternative…” she grumbled, looking more than a little conflicted.

“Cheer up, *Endless Paradox*,” said *Cutie Sayumi the Adorable Angel*, who had stepped over to comfort her.

“Not you too, Sayumi…” moaned Tomoyo.

“Trust me, I understand. Thanks to Andou’s meddling, you’ve ended up being called by the most excruciatingly chuuni title imaginable. I really do…sympathize… Pfff. Ha ha ha!”

“Liar! You’re eating this up!” Tomoyo buried her face in her hands. “Please…just forget all about that title, okay?”

“Mwa ha ha! I’m afraid that won’t be possible. I’ve already inscribed your true name in the *Bloody Bible*! That which is writ within its unholiest of pages can never be erased—wait, huh?” I reached into my bag to pull out the *Bloody Bible* only to recoil in shock. “I-It’s gone?!”

The *Bloody Bible* was missing! I’d lost the sacred text that laid bare all of the world’s deepest secrets!

“What do you mean?” asked Tomoyo. “What’s gone?”

“Tomoyo...” I whimpered. “This is terrible! The *Bloody Bible*’s gone missing!”

“You lost your *Bloody Vivre*?”

“Don’t call it that!” *Seriously, what am I supposed to do if that name starts to stick?* “Curses! Have *they* finally made their first move?! The situation is dire... That tome contains myriad secret and forbidden arts that must never fall into the wrong hands...”

“Put a sock in it, chuuni-boy. Though, now that you mention it...” Tomoyo stopped to think for a second. “Didn’t you accidentally dump all your crap out of your bag when we were leaving the club room earlier?”

Oh, yeah. I did, actually. I had to pick up all my stuff in a hurry and run to catch up with everyone. That clears things up! I must’ve dropped it then, and that means—

“That means it’s lying on the floor outside the club room?!”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Oooh, crap!” If it was outside the room, then who knew who might stumble across it? Having one of my trusted friends see it would be one thing, but having some total rando pick it up was a totally different matter. Just thinking about it made my blood run cold. “I’m gonna go search for it! You guys should head home without me!”

I dashed back toward the school without waiting for a reply. Run! No, fly! I have to hurry up and find the Bloody Bible before somebody else finds it first!

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Andou sprinted off to search for his edgelord encyclopedia, so the four of us were left to walk home without him. I considered waiting for him for a minute, but he *did* say we should head home without him, so I figured I might as well.

“Juu really is a scatterbrain, isn’t he, Tomoyo?” commented Hatoko, who was walking next to me. She was smiling, but in the sort of way that people smile when they don’t know what to make of somebody else’s issues. “Oh, whoops! I was supposed to call you by your title! What was it again...?”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. Andou’s the only one who cares about all that stuff, and he’ll have forgotten about it by tomorrow regardless.” *He’d* better *forget about it by tomorrow, anyway.*

“Ha ha, he sure will!” chuckled Hatoko, her smile a lot more genuine than it had been a moment before.

To be totally honest, I could never figure out the relationship those two had with each other. I got that they'd known each other for ages, and I could tell that they both understood each other on a pretty deep level, but at the same time, it felt like there was this serious sense of distance between them. Sometimes it felt like Hatoko was acting like Andou's mother or older sister, yet there were also times when she seemed more like his daughter or younger sister. Whatever they had going on, I couldn't wrap my head around it.

The one thing I *could* say for certain was that Hatoko didn't understand Andou's hyper-chuuni sense of aesthetics in the slightest. She was completely illiterate in that field; I don't know how else I could put it. Let me give an example: imagine trying to explain what it means to be a "chuuni" to your mom. Totally out of the question, right? She just wouldn't get it, and no matter how much you try to explain it to that sort of person, they'll never figure it out.

Being a chuuni is a special privilege reserved for a select few who were chosen—or perhaps a select few who *weren't* chosen. Not just anyone can understand the true value of that right.

Wait...hold on a second. I'm thinking like a total chuuni right now, aren't I? Arrrgh, Andou's infected me, I swear...

"Titles, huh...?" muttered Hatoko under her breath.

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing, really. All that talk about titles just brought back some memories." Hatoko hesitated for a moment, then continued. "The truth is, I was actually bullied a little back in grade school."

"Huh?" I grunted, caught off guard by the sudden shift to a pretty gloomy subject. I froze, and Sayumi and Chifuyu stopped and turned around to look at her as well. A sudden tension fell over our group.

Hatoko quickly picked up on the strained atmosphere. "Ah, but it wasn't a big deal at all, really!" she stammered, waving her hands in the air as she rushed to correct herself. "Yeah, actually, I don't even really know if it makes sense to call it 'bullying' at all!"

She paused for a moment, smiling in an oddly regretful sort of way, then continued. "When I was an elementary schooler, the other kids used to call me 'Yakitori.' My surname's Kushikawa, right? Well, someone said that sounded like the word for chicken skin yakitori, and to make matters worse the 'hato' in Hatoko means dove—another bird. Everyone thought the nickname made total sense, and it stuck."

"Yakitori," huh? It wasn't exactly an insult, or at least not a super direct one, but it still didn't sound like the sort of nickname your typical elementary school girl would be happy about receiving.

"All the kids who called me Yakitori were my friends, though. They meant it in a nice way, so I couldn't bring myself to tell them to stop... I wouldn't mind it at all if something like that happened these days, but back then it really bothered me."

Childish innocence has a way of crossing the line into cruelty sometimes. I doubted that the kid who came up with the nickname meant anything bad by it either. They might've even meant it as a term of endearment. But just because you don't *mean* anything bad doesn't mean that your actions can't hurt people. Getting called Yakitori by all her friends must've been really stressful for little Hatoko. *I* sure as hell wouldn't want a nickname like that.

"And you know who saved me in the end? It was Juu," she said, her eyes faintly sparkling. "He went right up to them and said, 'You're not giving her a lame title like that on my watch!' Then he came up with a new nickname for me all on his own."

Wait. Waaait a second. Don't get me wrong, I can absolutely see him doing that, but how exactly did that "save" you from anything? And are you telling me he's been that way since elementary school?! The guy had eighth-grader syndrome before he even made it to the eighth grade?!

"Umm, I think the nickname he gave me back then was...ah, it was '*Flaming Phoenix*'!"

Of course he'd say it in English, and of course he'd jump to "phoenix" just because she's named after a bird—not that I don't get where he was coming from with that part. It has a decent ring to it for something an elementary schooler thought up too. Nice and simple.

"Then all the other kids said that if they had to call me by a stupid nickname like that, they'd rather just call me Hatoko like normal. From then on, nobody called me Yakitori ever again!" Hatoko beamed as she wrapped up her story, but I couldn't help but slide a question in.

"Hatoko...? Please don't tell me you think that Andou knew it would end up that way and had the whole thing planned out from the beginning."

Hatoko burst out in laughter. "No, of course not! Juu was really sad about what they said about his name. He was depressed for a pretty long time after that."

Yeah, I can totally see that.

"I think Juu was just doing what he wanted to do and not thinking about what came next. Doesn't that sound just like him?"

I bet she's right. That's exactly what the Andou I know would do. Sayumi and Chifuyu apparently shared the opinion and were both nodding in agreement.

"But even if it wasn't on purpose, I still think of it as him saving me," concluded Hatoko.

"I suppose I can see that," replied Sayumi in a somewhat solemn tone. "Andou may be an utterly irredeemable idiot, but he can be surprisingly reliable as well."

Sayumi raised her hands before her, slowly clasping them together in front of her chest. "Take my power, *Route of Origin*. The power to return things to the way they're meant to be. The instant I obtained it, my mind jumped to a single question: could I use it to bring the dead back to life?"

I figured that most people would probably ask that same question. Whenever a manga character has that sort of restorative power, that's the very first thing you have to establish about them: can they revive the dead or not?

"But thanks to Andou, I was, well..." Sayumi paused. "I was saved from those worries."

We'd held meetings to discuss our powers time and time again since half a year ago, and at the very first of those meetings, Andou spoke up about the matter before anything else.

Listen to me, Sayumi.

Please—no matter what happens, never try to bring a dead person back to life.

No trying to bring back animals either.

It doesn't matter whether or not you can. Please, don't even think about trying.

He sounded so serious about the request, it was almost scary.

"I now understand very well why he said that," continued Sayumi, her voice wavering in a way that was really unusual for her. "The power to bring back the dead shouldn't exist. If I were to try it, and if it actually *were* to work, I'm not confident that my mind could withstand the pressure."

Real life isn't like *Dragon Ball*. If you were to bring the dead back to life, you couldn't just shout "Hurray!" and move on. If Sayumi really *did* have the power of resurrection... Just thinking about the implications was terrifying.

"He said something to me too," said Chifuyu, suddenly jumping into the conversation. "Andou said that I should never ever try to make life."

I remembered that. He'd given Chifuyu the same sort of speech he'd given Sayumi.

Chifuyu. You can make anything you want—it's fine.

Except for one thing: You can't make people. You can't make anything that's alive.

Never. I want you to promise me you won't, okay? That's all I ask of you.

Andou—one of the biggest chuuni dumbasses I've ever met—actually said all that stuff. When our powers appeared out of nowhere and we were all in a state of near-panic, he was the only one who'd kept calm. Half a year ago, the person most prepared to take action out of all of us was the one who'd run through "simulations" of those precise circumstances time after time: Andou Jurai.

"I'd completely lost my composure at the time," said Sayumi. "I appreciate how dangerous trying to bring somebody back to life would be now, but back when my power first awakened, it's hard to say how I would have reacted if I'd been put in that sort of situation. I think it's entirely plausible I would have made a terrible mistake, but Andou warned me against it before I had the chance."

Chifuyu nodded enthusiastically. She was in the same boat. For all we knew, if Andou hadn't been around to advise her, she might have tried to make a person or an animal without considering the consequences.

"Juu thought really, really hard about all of our powers," said Hatoko.

"He certainly did," agreed Sayumi. "I suspect he's thought more about them than even we have. He's thought through every aspect of them, helped us test them, wildly fantasized about them on some occasions, carefully estimated their consequences on others, and even granted us wonderful names for them. Tacky names that only a chuuni could ever think up, but wonderful names nonetheless."

I understood what they were trying to say. We were all terrified. We'd had almost godlike powers forced on us out of nowhere, and that scared us beyond belief. Andou, however, wasn't scared. Even though his own power was hilariously worthless, and even though he wouldn't last five seconds in the unlikely event we decided to attack him, he wasn't scared of us at all. He took on every issue that confronted us with total seriousness, and he called our horrifying, outlandishly lethal powers "cool."

Come to think of it, he said something when he gave our powers their ridiculously edgy names.

Mwa ha ha! The rite is complete, and now, half of your powers belong to me!

In granting them names, you see, I've bound them to myself! Mwa ha ha ha ha ha!

In other words…he promised to bear half the weight that our powers imposed upon us.

"Heh." I couldn't help but chuckle and roll my eyes. We were giving Andou *way* too much credit, and it was starting to grate on my nerves. "You're all overthinking it. He's just been doing whatever he feels like this whole time, right? He's been on a delusional chuuni rampage, and I'm *positive* he hasn't been thinking about all this that deeply."

Hatoko and Sayumi laughed along with me. "Yes, quite," said Sayumi. "Everything that he's come up with *has* played into the preposterous little scenario he's built up around himself."

"He did say he had lots of titles even before we thought up ours today. Juu's really something!"

Just then, Chifuyu trotted over and tugged on my skirt.

"What's up?" I asked, glancing down at her.

"I lied earlier," she replied.

"Earlier? Like, when?"

"When we were talking about 'chuuni.'"

Oh, right, the what-does-it-mean conversation.

"I was embarrassed, so I lied," she said, her voice muffled as she buried her face in my jacket. Apparently, that embarrassment was still lingering. "The truth is…I think Andou's really, really cool."

A silence fell over the group. None of us tried to argue against her compliment. We *couldn't* argue against it.

"Andou's really, really chuuni."

"You're right—Juu really is."

"I can't deny it."

"A chuuni-boy to the bitter end."

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"Achoo!"

Alone in an abandoned corridor after school, I sneezed with all my might.

"Wait a minute—what's this? Could it be that I'm under ultra-long-distance arcane attack by the spirit world's legendary Magical Marksman?" *That was close! If I hadn't bent over thanks to my sneeze just then, I'd have a hole where my head used to be!*

Anyway, I really hope nobody's found my cringe compil—I mean, the Bloody Bible. If somebody else actually read that thing…yeah, I think death would be the only option.

Not to say that I was embarrassed about anything in the book, of course! Not in the least! The *Bloody Bible* was my pride and joy, and everything written within it represented the hidden truth of this world. But, I mean…you know how it is, right? You can't just go leaking the hidden truth of the world to some random passerby, can you?

The point is that I absolutely could not afford to let anyone see the thing! I sped toward the literary club's room on the double…then stopped in my tracks.

"Huh…?" I muttered. A tall, lanky man was standing in front of our club room. His hair was colored pure silver, and he was dressed in a mostly black outfit that was as loud as it was stylish. His look was seriously coordinated, overall—he wouldn't have appeared out of place in a visual kei band. He was wearing a pair of round-lensed sunglasses, and in his hand he held a black notebook.

"Wait—gaaauuuggghhhhhh!" I shrieked like a banshee and sprinted up to him. *Oh god, oh crap, he found it! This obviously super cool dude saw my* Bloody Bible*!*

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“Ah, ah, ah, ah!” I stammered, unable to spit out anything better than a weird little series of incoherent grunts. In spite of that scream a moment before, I was actually pretty shy when it came to talking with people I didn’t know.

“Hey. This yours?” the man asked in a deep voice that was pretty easy on the ears. He was awfully handsome, looking at him up close.

Augggh! Of all the people to find it, why’d it have to be a hunk like this dude?

“Y-Yes!” I replied. “It’s, uhh, mine!”

“This notebook’s called the *Bloody Bible*, huh?”

I paused, but I couldn’t deny it. “Y-Yeah.”

“So I guess that’d make this name on the cover yours? ‘Guiltia Sin Jurai’?”

I paused for way longer, but still to no avail. “Yeah,” I finally admitted, doing my best to bear the wave of shame that was crashing down on me. Damn it! It’s mine, yes. That’s the undeniable truth, and there’s absolutely nothing embarrassing whatsoever about that fact…but gaaahhhhhhh! Just kill me now!

While I was busy letting my own self-consciousness drive me to the brink of madness, the man grinned, held out the *Bloody Bible*, and blew my mind with a single phrase.

“You’ve got a knack for names, kid.”

“Wha…?”

“‘Guiltia’ is immediately evocative of ‘guilty,’ and ‘Sin’ doubles down on the theme. But beyond the literal meaning, ‘Sin’ also brings to mind the Japanese word ‘shin,’ associating the name with divinity. It gives an overall impression of a wicked beast that’s committed sins that could never be atoned for—hell, it *reeks* of it! And on top of *that*, the structure of ‘Guiltia’ brings arcadia and utopia to mind. In short, a paradise awash in sin. And the accursed lightning of ‘Jurai’ on top of all that…? It gives me goosebumps.”

I accepted the notebook, my jaw just about flat on the floor. I’d been so convinced he was about to tease me mercilessly I was practically shivering, and it hadn’t crossed my mind for so much as a second that he’d *praise* me, of all things! And he hadn’t just praised me—he’d *understood* me!

“The *Bloody Bible*, eh? What a coincidence! I happen to have something quite similar,” he said, pulling an inky-black notebook out from somewhere inside his jacket. In lieu of writing, his book’s cover featured only an upside-down cross. “I call mine the *Reverse Crux Record*.”

“Th-The *Reverse Crux Record*… ‘Record of the Inverted Cross’… A corruption of the Christian cruciform, and a symbol of rebellion against God…” It was such an overpoweringly awesome name, I was stunned. *Hoooly crap. The* Reverse Crux Record*. That is cool. As. Hell!*

The man grinned. He seemed pleased by the specificity of my reply. “My name is Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First, though in *this* world I’ve taken on the alias Kiryuu Hajime.”

A true name and an alias! I could feel my heart pounding. A sense of clamorous excitement was building up deep inside of me. “Heldkaiser…a portmanteau of ‘Hell’ and ‘Kaiser’: the ruler of Hell. But that’s not all—the ‘d’ brings one’s mind to the word ‘held,’ past tense, implying that you’ve long since driven the very Abyss itself to ruin. Then ‘Luci-First’ evokes Lucifer, implying your status as a fallen angel… Every last detail of your name symbolizes rebellion against God! It’s so cool, I can feel my hair standing on end!”

I just *knew* he’d found some creative characters to write the true-name version of ‘Kiryuu’ with as well. No way was this a man who’d cop out on the little details!

“Bwa ha ha!” Kiryuu burst out in laughter that sounded remarkably similar to my own trademark mwa ha ha. “I *like* you, kid!” he declared, grinning delightedly.

At that point, I took another, closer look at his face. I could just barely make out the eyes behind his slightly askew sunglasses. His left eye was unremarkably colored, but his *right* eye was a deep, vivid shade of crimson. *Does he have heterochromia? No, that’s gotta be a colored contact lens.*

“Hmm? Oh,” he muttered, noticing that I was staring. He made a big show of pushing his sunglasses back into place with his middle finger. “My bad. You’re lucky—you were mere moments away from falling under the dominating influence of my Evil Eye.”

“Y-Your Evil Eye…”

“I wasn’t born with this right eye of mine. It bears a terrifying, taboo power that I inherited from a comrade who fell in battle, which is why I have yet to gain full control over it. I can’t stop it from running rampant on occasion, which is why I wear these sunglasses—they help keep it in check.”

An Evil Eye! It was so cool, it shook me to my very soul! I was pretty sure I saw him go out of his way to bump the sunglasses out of position when he was passing me my notebook a minute ago, but I decided to ignore that. Much cooler that way.

“An Evil Eye, you say? I see—you bear a fearsome burden indeed… Agh!” Suddenly, I clutched my right arm. “Gaaahhhhhh!”

“Hey, what’s wrong?! Are you okay?!” asked Kiryuu, shocked by my sudden display. Not that there was anything actually shocking going on whatsoever, but in *his* eyes, a terrifying spectacle was playing out before him. “Your right arm… It *can’t* be?!”

He stopped there, letting me fill in what exactly it “couldn’t be” with whatever I felt like. *Man, is this guy considerate or what? He totally gets it!* “It’s nothing, don’t worry about it…” I mumbled through labored breaths. “This happens all the time. *It’s* been a little unruly as of late—I’ll be sure to discipline *it* thoroughly when I have the chance.”

“You can’t be past your teens, yet you’ve already let one of *those* use your right arm as its vessel…? Just what sort of hell have you lived through?”

“Heh heh heh… The same sort as you, I’m sure. Don’t you think?”

“Hah! You’ve got that right!”

“Mwa ha ha…”

“Bwa ha ha…”

Kiryuu and I stood there, laughing together for absolutely no reason—*nay*! There was a reason, all right! A profound one that only the two of us could understand!

“Bwa ha ha! To think stopping by the old literary club would end with me stumbling across a talent like yours! It’s quite the thing, eh, Guiltia Sin Jurai?”

“I can sense the hand of destiny guiding us together, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First!”

We stood there facing each other, and I swear it was like looking in a mirror. We were identical, two sides of the same coin, yet at the same time profoundly different. Our existences perfectly contrasted each other’s, yet we were like twins. Our beings were entirely contradictory—destined to travel parallel to each other for eternity, never crossing paths.

That was our first contact. On that day, our conflict—a great war that would engulf the very universe itself—began.

“Wait…” I said as part of his speech suddenly hit me. “Did you say the literary club? Do you need something from us?”

“Yeah, sorta. I’m an alum, see. Got canned from my part-time job last night, so I had some spare time and figured I might as well swing by for a visit.”

Huh, weird. Feels like the hand of destiny just up and vanished.

Supernatural Battles

I wonder why Juu's power is so weak?

Kushikawa Hatoko
Senkou High, second year, class 3
Blood type: O
Over Element

Hers is the power to control the elements. Specifically, she can freely manipulate wind, fire, water, earth, and light. By typical fantasy standards, you'd think she was missing an element, but what is darkness, anyway? An easy definition is "the absence of light," and when you take that into consideration, the idea of a darkness-based attack makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. Light is a form of matter, more or less, but not only is darkness not matter, it's not anything. It's a phenomenon; nothing more or less. Dark matter's a thing, sure, but that's just called "dark" because we can't observe it—it's not actually darkness itself.

But all that said: whatever darkness is or isn't, it's definitely cool, so none of that stuff matters!

Darkness: hella cool. Stygian darkness: hella cool.

Excerpt from the Bloody Vivre

CHARACTER FILE 02

Chapter 3: A Fateful Encounter

Kiryuu and I hit it off so rapidly and spectacularly that within three minutes of our meeting I was convinced we'd been soul mates in a previous life. We quickly decided to find a better place to have a nice, long chat, and we ended up making our way to a nearby chain restaurant.

The place turned out to be bustling. It was packed full of students and families, but Kiryuu and I eventually found a table way in the back of the smoking section, where we took a seat and called a waiter over to place our orders.

I kept it simple, asking for a single cup of black coffee…which, honestly, I didn't have a taste for at all. I couldn't tell the difference between a good cup of coffee and a terrible one to save my life, but cool dudes drink it black, and that's what really mattered.

Kiryuu, on the other hand, must have been starving. He ordered a rice omelet, a hamburger steak, spaghetti carbonara, and a chocolate parfait to top it all off.

"Nice, isn't it?" he said, looking out across the restaurant after he'd polished off his food. His gaze had a calm, almost melancholic quality as he observed the other customers going about their business. There were young, innocent couples out on after-school dates (*May they drop dead*, I appended internally), children who made their kiddie meals look like the most delicious feasts in the world, and mothers who were trying to keep said children from making a mess.

"Depraved as this reality may be, so many of its people still find a way to smile and be happy," mused Kiryuu. "It's times like these that make me think there might be some meaning to keeping this world around after all."

Most people would probably have been thinking, "What the hell is this lunatic talking about?" by that point, but not me. I *got* him. I understood him on a profound level, and I immediately jumped aboard the train of thought he was conducting.

"A precious moment of unspoiled, everyday life," I murmured, "so far from the chaos and madness of the battlefield, it might slip from my mind and vanish into oblivion… Yeah. This *is* nice."

"Oblivion… Now there's a thought. I can only imagine how happy I'd be if I could just forget it all. But…that's not possible for me. The bloodstained chains of tragedy and hatred are bound too tightly around me. They'll weigh upon me for eternity, never releasing me from their grip. I still remember the faces of everyone I've lost… Each and every one of them is as vivid in my mind as the day I met them."

"First… You mean you still…?" I stopped there, taking care not to establish what I meant by "still." Didn't want to get in the way of his backstory. (Incidentally, we'd taken to calling each other "First" and "Guiltia.")

“Curse this damnable power of mine!” he spat, his tone heavy with sorrow, his face haggard and grief-stricken. “What good has it ever done for me?”

Apparently, Kiryuu had a perfect eidetic memory—or at least, that’s what he’d claimed a minute earlier. It’s one of those powers you see all the time in manga: the ability to remember absolutely everything you experience in perfect, photographic detail. At first glance, you’d think it’d be useful, but the truth of the matter is quite the opposite. The ability to forget is a form of salvation for humans like us, and I couldn’t imagine anything more hellish than having to remember each and every painful detail from your past until the day you die.

Now, he *had* said, “Let’s hit up that one restaurant! Y’know, umm…whatever it’s called. Ahh, man, it’s on the tip of my tongue!” just a short while beforehand, but I decided not to bring that up in the moment. You know how these things go—it’s hella cool to be born with a power you didn’t want that brings you nothing but grief.

Suddenly, the sorrow vanished from Kiryuu’s face. “Bwa ha ha!” he cackled, smiling ecstatically. “Okay, level with me, Andou—is ‘Jurai’ seriously your real name? That’s *badass*, man!”

The moment he called me “Andou,” I realized that we were flipping off the chuuni switch. Kiryuu was like me. Deep down, he realized that all the things he said and did were nothing more than an elaborate scenario of his own invention. In short, he was not, in fact, *actually* crazy. He knew there was a time and place for his antics, and he could swap in and out of that mindset when the need arose.

I never liked admitting it, but when all was said and done, Andou “Peaceful Wisteria” Jurai was the real me. I poured so much time and energy into developing the alternate reality in my mind that it almost felt like I’d *actually* mix it up with the real world every once in a while, but that had yet to happen. Except the part where I got a for-real superpower. Mwa ha ha.

“Thank you,” I replied, dropping into a more polite tone. “I think your surname’s crazy cool too, though!”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m fond of my surname, but I’ve never been super sold on ‘Hajime.’”

“Oh, really? I think it’s pretty nice, personally! Reminds me of Saitou Hajime, the Shinsengumi captain.”

“You’ve got a point. Saitou Hajime *was* pretty damn awesome.”

“I always liked him even better than Kenshin, actually.”

“Dude, same! Like, Gatotsu Zeroshiki was the *coolest* shit!”

It’s probably obvious by now, but we were talking about the Saitou Hajime from *Rurouni Kenshin*, not the real-life historical figure. This is elementary-grade nerd knowledge!

“Speaking of the Gatotsu techniques,” he continued, “y’know how kids would always try to imitate them with a stick or an umbrella or whatever

but hold it in their *right* hand? That always used to piss me off so much! Like, if you don't know the real Saitou Hajime was left-handed and that his techniques in the manga were based on that fact, you don't deserve to play Gatotsu!"

"Oh my god, *yes*, that annoyed me so much! I totally get you! People who talk themselves up without actually doing the reading are the *worst*! Like all those girls who go on and on about how cute Chopper is when they don't even friggin' read *One Piece*!"

"I *know*, right? Man, I can't tell you how much those chicks piss me off!"

We had the most incredible rapport with each other, right out of the gate. *Holy crap, just talking with this guy's so much fun!*

"I really like how you took the 'one' from 'Hajime' and made it into 'First' instead, though!" I said, sliding back to the original topic. "Throwing 'Lucifer' in with it was downright inspired too! 'Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First'—now *that's* a true name!"

"C'mon, don't flatter me. Your true name's just as good, y'know? All the titles in your *Bloody Bible* were really solid too."

Oh…right. He found the Bloody Bible*, and I guess he must've paged through it.* I was pretty embarrassed by that thought, but I was also pretty happy about the compliment.

"The power to return things to the way they were meant to be—*Route of Origin*. You were playing off the homophone there, right? Like, how when you say it out loud you can't tell for sure if it's '*Route* of Origin' or '*Root* of Origin'? That's good shit, man."

Wait, he figured that out on his own?! Oh. My. God! I'm so friggin' happy about this! I could never bring myself to tell everyone about that part 'cause it always felt too awkward! It'd have been like explaining the punchline of my own joke.

While I was screaming internally, Kiryuu kept talking. "That wasn't the only good one either. The stygian flames of Purgatory: *Dark and Dark*! I love how you doubled up on the darks like that—it really sells the vibe."

Yes! Exactly! It wouldn't work if you didn't say it twice! Ahh, holy crap, I love this man! Marry me!

"Lemme guess—you're the sort of person who likes your names short and snappy, right?" asked Kiryuu.

"If I had to pick one way or the other, then yeah," I replied. "I like to keep them within, like, three or four words tops. If it needs more than that, I'll just add it in as flavor text *before* I say the actual name part."

"I'm a long name person, myself. And I'm talking *long*—like, practically-a-sentence long."

"Oh, yeah. Those're pretty cool too." *To each their own, I guess.*

"Oh, sorry—phone call," said Kiryuu, pulling out a cell phone. His attitude shifted visibly as he answered it. Suddenly, he looked all business. "Leatia? Yeah, it's me."

Okay, nope, that's definitely *not a real name! Here we go!* I immediately assumed that he was doing the "pretend to get a phone call and fake a super intriguing conversation with lots of vague foreshadowing" thing. Even if I was proven right, though, I had no intention of cutting him off.

"What? Oh, come on—that's *your* job, not mine. Tell the War Management Committee to clean up their own mess!"

Not saying anything.

"I *know* that a mysterious organization called *F*'s trying to dismantle the system behind the War itself. So, what, you're gonna pause the whole War, gather everyone up and murder their asses? What a load of BS."

The way he phrased that was conspicuously expository, but still, not saying anything.

"Right, I get it. I'll do it. I was planning on crushing 'em before long regardless. I'll make them understand who *really* rules over this War."

Still not saying anything.

"'Powers akin to those of the gods themselves'? I don't give a damn. God or not, anyone who decides to stand in my way's getting sent to the deepest pits of The Heavens' Hell."

That last bit definitely sounded like it was supposed to be a catchphrase, but not saying anything.

Kiryuu hung up his phone, then looked back over at me. "Sorry about that. It was my boss from my part-time job."

I *almost* shouted "Like hell it was!" at the top of my lungs, but I barely held it in. I know how to mind my manners. I was also struck by how fun the whole fake phone call bit looked and made a mental note to give it a try sometime soon myself.

"What were we talking about?" asked Kiryuu. "Oh, right—chuuni names."

"Ah… Right."

Hearing *that* from him put a damper on my raised spirits. *Chuuni*… The derogatory ring of the word somehow sucked the fun right out of the conversation. It proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Kiryuu was aware of and open about the fact that he was a chuuni. And being a chuuni was cool, sure…but the *word* itself still carried an element of contempt to it that I just couldn't help but hear.

"Hey, what's with the scowl?" asked Kiryuu, noting my shift in attitude.

"It's nothing, really… Umm, question, though. Do you think that people like you and me count as chuunis?"

"Huh? Oooh," he murmured, smiling gently. His expression carried a depth of understanding to it that made all of the doubts and worries that had been building up within me melt away in an instant. "When you put it that way, yeah, I get it. 'Chuuni' sure does sound like some sorta slur. It's not the sorta thing you're supposed to call yourself, and it's not a label you'd be happy to have slapped on you."

It was like he'd seen right through me. He leaned forward as he carried on. "Hey, ever heard of *Don Quixote*?"

"Umm… You mean the chain of discount department stores?"

"That's Don Quijote."

"So then, from the Seven Warlords in *One Piece*…?"

"That's Donquixote Doflamingo. I'm talking about the book his character was inspired by." Kiryuu didn't look put off in the slightest by my confusion, and he launched into a detailed explanation.

According to him, *Don Quixote* is a twelfth-century novel that was written by a Spaniard named Miguel de Cervantes. It stars a low-ranking nobleman who reads way too many Arthurian tales of chivalric romance and eventually declares himself a legendary knight-errant. He takes on the incredibly ostentatious name Don Quixote de la Mancha, gets himself a decrepit old horse named Rocinante and a squire named Sancho Panza, and sallies forth into the world with them on a quest to right all wrongs.

Held captive by his own wild delusions, Don Quixote declares a countryside girl to be the princess he adores (unbeknownst to her) and jousts with windmills, convinced that they're giants. In short, it's a story of the wild and eccentric behavior he displays over and over throughout his journey.

Oh, huh, I thought. *I had no idea.* I'd done my fair share of reading into Greek mythology, biblical writings, psychological texts, and the like, but I'd never dug especially deeply into that sort of literature. And honestly, by "reading into" I mean "browsing Wikipedia articles and smirking at the cool bits." Less reading, more skimming.

In any case, one thing in particular stood out to me about *Don Quixote*'s story. No matter how I looked at it—

"Dude had a *nasty* case of chuunibyou, right?"

Kiryuu said it for me, and I nodded in agreement. Don Quixote fit the symptoms to a T. He convinced himself that he was special, gave himself a "true name," and fell deeper and deeper into a fictional scenario that he himself had devised. If that wasn't chuunibyou, then what else could you call it?

"Back when it first came out, *Don Quixote* was thought of as a comedy. People would laugh at the protagonist's stupid, cringey antics, and they didn't read any deeper into it than that. However, over the course of the ages, society's perspective on the book has shifted." Kiryuu spoke smoothly and eloquently, and I found myself listening along without so much as considering interjecting. It was like some sort of invisible gravitational force was pulling my attention toward him.

"Dostoevsky—y'know, the *Crime and Punishment* guy—had a lot to say about *Don Quixote*. 'Here the great poet and heart-reader discerned one of the deepest and most mysterious traits of the human spirit,' he said of one passage, and called the novel on the whole 'the grandest and saddest book conceived by the genius of man.' So, yeah, you could say he was a fan."

“He was a fan of a book…with a chuuni protagonist?” I mumbled, almost in a daze. One of the deepest and most mysterious traits of the human spirit? The grandest and saddest book conceived by man?

“The word ‘chuunibyou’ only got thought up recently, but the condition itself’s been around since the time of Don Quixote—no, most likely since even earlier than that. By my best guess, the general concept of being a chuuni has existed since the dawn of man and the birth of society. It just took us ages to stick a name on it.”

Kiryuu pushed up his rounded sunglasses with his middle finger again. In the instant he adjusted them, I caught a glimpse of his right eye—his Evil Eye. It almost looked like it was glimmering with an eerie light.

“Hey, Andou. What does the word ‘chuuni’ mean to *you*?” he asked, catching me off guard. The question came so abruptly I was almost speechless, but I somehow managed to work up the presence of mind to reply.

“To me, I think it means…not lying to myself.” I gave him the answer I’d come up with the other day. It wasn’t easy to overcome my shyness and spit out my real, honest opinion, but I got there in the end. I had a feeling that I *had* to be honest with him in particular.

“Good answer. Kinda abstract, though,” said Kiryuu, cracking another smile. Not just a smile, actually—a *smirk*. The expression he was making practically defined the word. “There are a ton of different ways to be a chuuni, but they all spring up from the same source. It starts with self-denial. You can’t stand either yourself or the world you live in, so you start dreaming up a fabricated alternative. Within that very self-denial, though, lies an intense craving for self-affirmation.”

I was silent, listening with bated breath.

“You want to become somebody else, but to the same degree, you also want to be acknowledged as the current you. You want to flourish in some other world, but to the same degree, you want to be admired in the world you live in now. That conflict between self-denial and the desire for self-approval is the fundamental root of chuunibyou.”

“An unresolvable contradiction…” I whispered.

“An Endless Paradox.”

I gulped. What sort of coincidence was that? What sort of *destiny* was that?

“Most people can’t handle that contradiction. They give up on it faster than you’d believe. They ‘grow up,’ conform to society, and live out their lives just going with the flow. They shift from thinking they’re awesome because they’re not like everyone else to thinking they’re awesome because they’re *just* like everyone else.”

Kiryuu paused for a moment to sigh. There was a wistfulness about his expression that, combined with his slender figure, gave him the look of a goddess lamenting the foolishness of mankind. Beyond that wistfulness, though, a quiet fury blazed.

"'Grow up,' 'grow up,' they say… They repeat it over and over again, like a flock of dumbass parrots. And of course, when they *say* 'grow up,' what they *mean* is 'behave exactly the way society and the strangers around you want you to.' The majority of humans believe that's a virtue—or rather, they *want* to believe it is."

"Do you think growing up is a bad thing?" I asked.

"Nah, that's not it. It's just that being a chuuni and being an adult are mutually exclusive. Being a chuuni's supposed to be the exclusive privilege of children, but every once in a while, you get adults like me who *can't* grow up. We'll carry that contradiction with us all the way till the day we die—case studies in chuunibyou until the bitter end."

"You know," I muttered, "when you put it that way, it sounds sort of like how superpowers work in all those supernatural battle stories. Everyone has the potential to unleash their powers, but only a select chosen few actually ever manage it."

"Good comparison. Gets the gist across nicely." Kiryuu gave a satisfied nod as he pulled a packet of cigarettes out from his pocket. He stuck one in his mouth, then he flicked open a showily decorated and super-stylish Zippo, lighting his cigarette in one fluid motion. *Dang, the way you light those things is cool. Bet he spent ages practicing that in his room.*

"You could very well say that the history of humanity is the history of chuunibyou," Kiryuu explained. "Edison, who disputed the idea that one plus one *must* equal two. Copernicus, who denounced the geocentric model of the solar system. The Wright brothers, who never for a moment doubted that someday they would soar through the skies. Einstein, who thought to question the function of light itself. You get where I'm going with this? The people who turn the world on its head are always those who refuse to give up believing that not being like everyone else makes them awesome: the chuunis!"

I wasn't totally sold on the whole diagnosing actual historical figures with chuunibyou thing, but I did more or less understand where he was coming from. It's common knowledge that the people who end up getting acknowledged by society as geniuses tend to be more than a little abnormal.

"The power of chuunibyou makes the world go round," concluded Kiryuu with a final smirk. It was the smile of a villain looking down upon the world he owned, and yet there was something about it that struck me as ephemeral as well. I think the best way to describe it would be "a super chuuni way to smile that was cool as hell."

Just then, a voice rang out. "Huh? Is that you, Andou?" I turned toward the entrance, where a very familiar girl was standing.

"Tomoyo? What're you doing here?" I asked as she walked over to me. Ah, whoops, forgot to call her by her title! Meh, whatever, that bit was getting old anyway.

"I'm just here to study. I like to hang out in this restaurant while I work."

"Where's everyone else?"

“They all went home already. We decided to take advantage of you being gone for once to hang out around the station for a while, but we already wrapped that up.”

“Why’re you making it sound like you guys like it better when I’m not around?!”

“That’s…not *exactly*…”

“Why’re you hesitating?! Stop it! Am I getting ostracized?! Is that what’s happening here?!” As I continued to panic, she silently broke eye contact. “Say something! This is getting way too real!”

“H-Hey, let’s all hang out together some other time!”

“That’s *definitely* the sort of ‘some other time’ that actually means ‘literally never’! It’s the soft-no ‘some other time’ that Japanese people are internationally famous for! Do you realize how much trouble foreign visitors who don’t know how to interpret that go through on a daily basis?!”

“Oh, by the way, Andou!” piped up Tomoyo, transparently trying to change the subject. I was *pretty* sure she’d been kidding about the whole excluding me thing, but that sort of joke was always sorta panic-inducing regardless, and I wished she’d lay off them a little. “Did you end up finding your *Vivre*?”

“Don’t call it my *Vivre*, and yeah. He picked it up for me,” I explained, gesturing at Kiryuu. Tomoyo glanced over at him, then let out a bewildered gasp and froze solid, her eyes wide open. Her bag fell to the floor.

“Bwa ha ha!” bellowed Kiryuu. “It’s been a while, *Endless Paradox*!”

For a moment, I was stunned by his words. *What? Why would he know Tomoyo’s—*

“Hajime…? Andou, why are you with my brother?”

Her voice was so quiet I could barely hear her, which stood in sharp contrast to mine as I shouted “Wh-What?! He’s your *brother*?!” The revelation was so abrupt I couldn’t hide my astonishment. Kiryuu and Tomoyo were both totally ignoring me at that point, though; they’d branched off into their own conversation.

“Wrong!” snapped Kiryuu. “That’s Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First to you.”

“Oh, not another one of your weird names…” sighed Tomoyo.

“Bwa ha ha! I’d say it’s still lacking in chuuni power compared to the true name you thought up in middle school, Miss *Eternal Paradox*!”

“M-Middle school was ages ago. Don’t bring it up!”

That answered one question: apparently, *Eternal Paradox* was a title that Tomoyo had come up with back in middle school after all. I’d already gotten a pretty clear impression that she was one of us back then, so I wasn’t super surprised. Girl must’ve really gone out of her way to reinvent herself when she got into high school.

“St-St-Stop grinning at me like that!” shouted Tomoyo, wheeling around to glare at me for just a brief moment before returning her gaze to Kiryuu. He was clearly the more pressing issue, so she didn’t have the time to bother with me for long. She paused for a second, then spoke again in a

slightly calmer tone. “When did you get back into town, Hajime? And what the heck did you do to your hair...?”

“Oh, this...?” said Kiryuu, brushing his hand through his silver locks. “It turned this color in an instant after I watched my most trusted of comrades get slain before my very eyes. The despair I felt for the world and the rage I felt toward myself were so overwhelming, they left a permanent mark upon my form...”

“Not permanent enough to keep your roots from being the same color as ever, apparently. And what’s with the red eye?”

“You mean you don’t remember? This was once the right eye of that very same comrade...”

“I guess today’s a right-eye day, then? Looks like you’re still swapping the colored contact from one side to another on a daily basis since it messes with your vision if you leave it in for too long.”

“Oh, I see how it is—*they* must’ve gotten to you before I could and planted all these weird ideas in your head!”

“Who are ‘they’ supposed to be? For crying out loud...” Kiryuu had turned the chuuni dial back up to eleven, much to Tomoyo’s exasperation. You could definitely tell that they were pretty close from the way they talked to each other. “Hey, Hajime, would you *please* just give up and come home already?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Everybody’s worried about you! Dad’s not even mad anymore.”

“I said no!” snapped Kiryuu. He’d been smirking and laughing the whole time since I met him, so this was my first time seeing him act openly angry. “When you get home, give dad a message from me: ‘I’m counting on you to send money for my living expenses again this month.’”

Tomoyo was speechless, and I couldn’t blame her. Like, seriously, that’s not the sort of line you can deliver in a pissed-off tone! You built up this whole dramatic, imposing aura, but what you actually said in the end was sorta pathetic! I was starting to see his whole “people telling you to grow up” speech in a new, significantly less appealing light.

“If you’re gonna run away from home, the least you could do is earn your own money,” said Tomoyo. She sighed deeply, profoundly embarrassed to be related to the man before us.

“Well, it seems we’ve been interrupted, Guiltia. We’ll have to table our talk of impossible dreams for today.” Kiryuu stubbed out his cigarette in a nearby ashtray as he stood up. “And just when we were about to renew the ties that have bound us together since our previous lives... What a shame.”

“We’ll meet again, First,” I replied. “Assuming, that is, that the fates truly have chosen you!”

“Bwa ha ha!”

“Mwa ha ha!”

“What sort of weird-ass understanding have you two freaks reached?!”

Hey, don’t wince at us like that! And don’t call us freaks, come on!

As Kiryuu passed by Tomoyo on his way to the exit, he gave her a quick pat on the shoulder. It was a casual, seemingly natural gesture that Tomoyo accepted without a hint of distaste. Weirdly enough, that was the moment above all else that made me appreciate that the two of them really were family.

"Oh, right. Andou!" Kiryuu turned around and called me by my normal name. Chuuni mode: off. "I got to hear plenty of your chuuni names, but come to think of it, I never returned the favor. Figured I'd share one to make up for it, y'know?"

"Huh? Oh, no, it's fine! You really don't have to."

"C'mon, not like it's a big bother for me. I'm telling you one whether you want it or not!" At that point, I realized that he just wanted to show one of his names off. He slid his sunglasses down just far enough to glance over their frames, revealing his eyes—one jet-black, one a deep crimson, and both locked right onto me.

"Madness made manifest. A crescendo of calamity. The ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, powerful enough to crush even the heavens and the fools who rule them: *Lucifer's Strike*. Such is the name of the malevolent power I wield, and such is the name of the power that will turn this world upon its head."

My heart was pounding so hard, I could practically hear the *thump, thump* of its beat. A strange, unfamiliar sensation—almost like fear or terror, but at the same time, almost joyous—was welling up from the deepest depths of my being. It felt like I had touched something truly and genuinely unknown. This wasn't a question of being *cool* or *uncool*. I could feel something in him, something *real*, that existed in a totally separate dimension from those boundaries.

"*Dark and Dark*. Someday, the wheels of fate will bring the two of us together once more. I await that inevitability with bated breath." With those final, ominous words, Kiryuu departed from the restaurant. People like us just love saying ominous stuff like that pretty much whenever we get an excuse to, though, so I didn't pay it much mind.

Tomoyo, on the other hand, let out another long, pained sigh and slumped down into the seat that Kiryuu had been occupying until a moment before.

"So that guy's your brother, huh…?" I asked, still barely able to believe it.

"Unfortunately," replied Tomoyo.

"He's…how to put it…sorta hard to pin down, isn't he? I couldn't even begin to tell what he was thinking." Not that that was a bad thing. I actually appreciated it, if anything. But the thing about not being able to tell what he was thinking was that I also had no idea how much of what he'd said was serious, and how much was just him messing around.

He had an overwhelming, all-encompassing presence, yet at the same time, he was formless and hard to grasp. He was like fog—a deep, thick fog that you couldn't shake off, no matter how hard you try.

"Yeah, I guess," replied Tomoyo. "Hajime's always been like that."

"I'm gonna guess your exceptional sense of aesthetics is thanks to him, right?"

She glanced away, blushing slightly. Actually, she said something about having an older brother who's really into manga and influenced her, didn't she? This explains everything. With an older brother who's that intense, you'd end up learning all about his hobbies, whether you wanted to or not.

Suddenly, I realized something unusual. "Wait a second. Your surname's Kanzaki, right...? He said his was Kiryuu."

"It is, yeah. We're half-siblings. Different mothers." *Ohh, he's her half brother! I* thought *they looked nothing alike, but I never considered that possibility.* "Same dad, of course. Kiryuu is Hajime's mom's surname. We've lived together for most of our lives, but he never stopped using her name."

"Huuuh. Sounds complicated."

"Do you wanna hear about it?"

"Do *you* wanna talk about it?"

"Nah."

"I'm good, then."

"Cool."

Tomoyo's gaze dropped to the ashtray on our table. She stared at the butt of Kiryuu's cigarette for a moment before slowly beginning to open up about him, her tone drenched with a longing for days gone past.

"Hajime's always been an incredible person. He's smart, he's good-looking, and he excelled both academically *and* athletically in school. He'd always end up ranking first or second in the national practice exams. He joined the literary club in high school, but he was in track and field in middle school and went all the way to the national tournament. I'm talking, like, Kudou Shinichi- or Yagami Light-level incredible."

"Holy crap!" That would mean he'd *easily* exceeded the level necessary to qualify as an Ultimate Student.

"About a year ago, though, he told us out of the blue that 'there's something wrong with this world' and just...left. He dropped out of college and ran away from home."

"Holy *crap*!" *It sounded cool for a second, but that's just dumb! It's so dumb, it's not even funny!* "I think I get it now, though. You decided to join the literary club because your missing brother used to belong to it, and you thought you might find some sort of hint about his whereabouts there, right?"

"Nah, nothing that cliché. I just joined the literary club 'cause I felt like it. It's not like he totally broke off contact with us, anyway." Tomoyo scratched her head, glancing away awkwardly. She'd been acting a little awkward for most of the conversation, actually.

I guess she was probably embarrassed about having one of her friends meet her family, and fair enough. I don't think anyone *wants* to have that side of their life exposed like that. I sure as hell didn't want to introduce my sister to everyone.

"Oh, right, I almost forgot. Didn't Hajime call you *Dark and Dark* at the end there, Andou?"

"Oh, yeah, he did. He looked through the *Bloody Bible* when he found it."

"Huh...?"

"Whoa, why're you going all pale?! It was fine! He actually really liked it!"

"Oh, I get it... He *would* like something like that. Anyway, that's not the important part—*please* tell me you didn't let him know about our powers?" The look she shot me was pointed enough to draw blood.

"'Course I didn't! Give me *some* credit." I *did* wonder for just a moment about what would happen if I told him, but that wasn't nearly enough of a reason for me to actually spill the beans. We'd all decided as a group not to tell anyone outside the five of us about our powers.

"Oh? Well, good," she replied, satisfied.

"He really is an incredible guy, though," I repeated. I didn't mean that sarcastically either. I was genuinely impressed. He wasn't like anyone else I'd ever met before, and 'incredible' was the only word I could think of that did him justice. Maybe he *was* just a perfectly ordinary person who happened to be super cringey, but weirdly enough, that wouldn't even bother me. "Oh, and by the way..."

I glanced at the little container the waiter put our receipt in. It came out to 3,640 yen in total, of which my coffee accounted for three hundred.

"He sure did casually stick me with the bill."

"I am so...*so* sorry."

Chuuni's compli-cated...

Carries a stuffed animal everywhere she goes.

Himeki Chifuyu
Yokoi Elementary, fourth year, class 1
Blood type: AB
World Create

Hers is the power of genesis. She can make just about anything. Her current size record is creating a space roughly twelve acres in area—about the size of the Tokyo Dome. She can even make complicated objects like phones and TVs. Apparently, as long as she can visualize it, it just works. According to her, she pulls the stuff she makes from **"the memory of the world itself."**

Food is, of course, among the things she can create, but apparently, food she makes with her power just doesn't feel appetizing to her, so she never bothers.

Excerpt from the Bloody Vivre

CHARACTER FILE 03

Chapter 4: Allure of the Dark Dragon

“Heeey, Juu, whatcha doing?”

Hatoko, as casual and carefree as ever, came over to strike up a conversation with me one day after school in the club room.

The five of us had all shown up for club on that particular day. Sayumi was poring through some complex-looking tome she’d dug up from the Used Bookstore of the Divine, Chifuyu was hugging her favorite plushie and zoning out, and Tomoyo was messing around with her laptop, as usual.

Speaking of Tomoyo, she’d been acting sort of strangely ever since the day I met Kiryuu…in the sense that she hadn’t been acting strangely in the slightest. You’d *think* an encounter like that would’ve had some sort of impact on her, but she was behaving exactly the same as she always did. I had to assume that she and her brother had some sort of mutual understanding going on.

“Not now, Hatoko! I’m trying to concentrate,” I said, shooing off my meddling childhood friend. Unfortunately for me, she was not so easily shooed.

“Oh, c’mon, just tell me!” she whined, playfully pushing my shoulder.

“Gah! Hey, cut that out! You’re gonna make me screw up!”

“Why not just tell me what you’re doing, then?”

“Can’t you tell by looking?”

“I wouldn’t be asking if I could!”

I heaved an exasperated sigh, holding my arms out for her to see as I prepared to explain the obvious. My right sleeve was rolled up, and I was holding a pen in my left hand.

“I’m drawing a dark dragon on my right arm!”

Crash!

I heard the unmistakable sound of shattering tableware. Turning around, I found Tomoyo frozen in place, the remains of her teacup scattered across the ground. “Why…? Why are you *always* like this…?” she muttered under her breath.

“Pull yourself together, Tomoyo. You’re better than this,” said Sayumi, patting her on the shoulder. At the same time, she casually repaired Tomoyo’s teacup using *Route of Origin* without missing a beat. “I understand how you feel, but stay calm. I’m sure this is normal behavior on whatever planet Andou’s from.”

“Sayumi… Yeah, you’re right. That dumbbell’s a space alien for sure.”

“Impossible!” I shouted. “How did you know that I’m the crossbreed progeny of an earthling woman and Lig-Nahn, the leader of the Agna, a tribe of intergalactic warrior-nomads?!”

“We were already insulting you. Please don’t use that as a chance to give us even *more* reason to look down on you,” said Sayumi, cringing conspicuously.

Ugh! I thought I'd made a pretty clever comeback too!

"Why do you chuunis always love pretending to be mixed-race, anyway?" asked Tomoyo. And, I mean, she wasn't *wrong*. Being half-something's a core element to so many great characters! Like half-demon, or half-monster, or half-vampire! I dunno how to put it, but it's just…just *great*, somehow!

"It's because it's a convenient plot device to drive a narrative forward," Sayumi answered in my place. "You can have a character face oppression and adversity on account of their heritage and make them angst about not being able to fit in with either race. It's a free pass to put your character through as much tragedy and trauma as you'd like. It's an exceptionally easy backstory for an author to work with, all things considered. I'd imagine that's the primary reason why so many works of fiction make use of it, wouldn't you say?"

Could your explanation possibly get any more bleak and pragmatic? You might be right, sure, but you're still not supposed to come out and say stuff like that!

"So, anyway, what do you think you're doing, Andou?" asked Tomoyo, bringing us back on topic.

"I already told you, didn't I? I'm drawing a dark dragon on my arm."

"Not what I meant. I'm asking *why* you'd do something that bizarre."

"Because my right arm's there!"

"Quit acting like your right arm's Everest! Everyone has one of those, it's nothing special!"

"*Excuse* me?! *Everyone* has a right arm?! Have you already forgotten the tragic tale of Edward Elric and his automail?!"

"Was that *really* the moment for an FMA reference?! Quit nitpicking!"

"That's not my only reason either! I'm also doing it because there's a dark dragon in my heart!"

"No, there isn't! Literally or metaphorically!"

"Okay, but all jokes aside—I was thinking yesterday, and I realized that there's no reason why my dark side's physical manifestation necessarily *has* to be humanoid."

"Sorry, but if that was you setting the jokes aside, I'm done with this conversation."

"Just hear me out! We got our powers half a year ago, right? Well, when we did, the dark side that had always dwelled deep within me fused with *Dark and Dark* as it awakened! It makes total sense for its manifestation to change from a human to a terrible and wicked dark dragon under those circumstances, right?"

"Hmm… Okay, look. I've been shooting down your ideas on reflex this whole time, and I probably shouldn't have jumped into the conversation by denying everything you said from the word go. Let me take a moment to calm down and seriously think this through."

Tomoyo fell silent. Several seconds passed by. Her eventual verdict…

"Nope! Makes absolutely no friggin' sense at all!"

My dark side/dark dragon transformation backstory had been completely shot down. I didn't expect anything better from her, though—visionaries always have their theories brutally criticized by their peers. It's the price you have to pay when you're ahead of the times.

"The *point* is," I asserted, trying to bring our little back and forth to a close, "right now, I'm carrying out an extremely important and sensitive ritual to tame my inner dragon! Don't distract me, okay?"

"Whatever you say, chuuni." Tomoyo rolled her eyes, and I went back to drafting up my dark dragon. *Hmph!*

That said, I wasn't having the easiest time of it. I was, after all, trying to draw on my *right* arm. Drawing a dark dragon with my left hand would've been pretty rough even if I wasn't trying to draw it on my own body, and to make matters worse, I wasn't much of an artist to begin with. Honestly, even drawing it with my *right* hand would've been a challenge—using my nondominant hand made it borderline impossible.

Hatoko must've noticed that I was struggling, so she tried talking to me again. "Hey, Juu, wouldn't it be easier to use your right hand and draw it on your left arm?"

"No way! *Dark and Dark* dwells within my right arm, not the left one!"

"Oh, I get it... So you *have* to draw the dragon on your right arm."

"That's right!"

Hatoko fell silent. It looked like she was thinking deeply about something. Tomoyo and Sayumi, meanwhile, kept their color commentary running.

"Hatoko never calls Andou out on any of his crap, does she?"

"There's something oddly relaxed about the atmosphere when those two talk. It's peculiar."

I decided to ignore them. The dark dragon took priority! Just then, though, Hatoko had an idea.

"Oh, I know! Why don't I draw it for you?" she offered.

"*You*? I dunno..." I had a funny feeling this would end poorly, but Hatoko kept insisting until I reluctantly acquiesced. I was using a water-based pen, so even in the worst case scenario, it couldn't go *that* horribly wrong.

"You get what I'm going for here, right, Hatoko?" I asked, still a little nervous. "You know what a dark dragon is?"

"Yeah! It's just a big black dragon, right? Easy peasy!" she declared confidently.

"Are you even good at drawing? I can't remember ever seeing you do art stuff."

"I'm not so sure myself, but my friends always say that I'm an artistic genius!"

"And, err, you're sure they actually mean it?" You'd *think* that would be an unambiguous compliment, but considering how sarcastic kids our age could be, I wasn't prepared to take it at face value. Hatoko didn't let my

concern get to her, though; she was already leaning over my arm, happily drawing away.

It wasn't long at all before she sat up again. "Okay, finished! It's a masterpiece, if I do say so myself!"

I looked down at my arm to find a long, detailed dragon drawn upon it. Its head—far and away the hardest part of a dragon to draw right—was rendered well enough to easily score a passing grade. There was just one big ol' deal-breaker of a problem.

"Why'd you draw it in a straight line?!" The dragon stretched directly from the back of my hand to my elbow without a single curve to be seen. It looked like somebody had jammed a ruler down its throat or something. "Dragons are supposed to be, like, all twisty and turny and stuff! It's not a dragon if it isn't!"

"Whaaat? But it'd be way harder to draw a twisty dragon, and it'd also mean your dragon has bad posture!"

"Bad...posture...? Who *cares*? Dragons have naturally bad posture, that's just how they are!"

"Oh, I didn't know that! I guess dragons must all be a bunch of slouching hoodlums."

"Y'know what, sure, let's go with that. Dragons are hoodlums. The point, Hatoko, is that you should draw it all twisty this time!"

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Take two! Hatoko redrew the dragon in a flash.

"Done!"

"Oh, come *on*, it looks exactly the same as before! Why'd you draw it straight *again*?!"

"I didn't! Look closer, it's super twisty!"

"Did...did you *corkscrew* it?!" I hadn't noticed at first since the whole thing was black, but when I looked really closely, I could just barely tell that she'd drawn it to be twisted like a drill bit. Given that it was two-dimensional, though, it looked exactly the same as the first one at a glance.

"I drew it all twisted up like a wrung-out towel!" Hatoko declared.

"Like a towel?! Wouldn't that be super bad for it?!"

"Honestly? Yup! It's on the verge of death."

"The verge of death?!"

"It got twisted so hard, its bodily fluids are squirting out!"

"Is *that* what this bit's supposed to be?! I thought it was breathing fire! Why would you do that to the poor dragon?!"

"You're the one who said to draw it all twisty, Juu."

"I said *twisty*, not *twisted*!"

"Hmm... I don't know how I'd draw it like that on your arm without going off the edge, though! They'd have to be really tiny little twists to fit."

"It doesn't matter if it goes off the edge! You can use my entire arm as the canvas, not just the back part. Wrap it all the way around if you have to!"

"Oh, really? You should've said so sooner!" It looked like she had actually thought she had to stick to the back of my arm. That would explain the pencil-straight dragons she'd drawn so far. This time, though, she set about drawing one with no such restriction in mind. "Juu, I need to draw on the other side! Turn your arm over, okay?"

"Sure."

"Okay, I'm drawing on the top next! Turn it over again."

"'Kay."

"And, one more time!"

"Right...no, wait a second. I've already spun it all the way around! I'd dislocate it if I went any further!"

"One more time!"

"Wait, *wait*! My arm can't spin any farther than that! You're gonna pop it out in the joint! I am *not* that good at yoga, and I can't pull off a Gum-Gum Rifle no matter how many times you twist it around!"

"Stay still! I'm trying to focus!"

"Ow, ooow! Cut it out! I don't have the soft, supple shoulder joints to throw a moving fastball like the main character of *Ace of Diamond*!"

Hatoko paused for a moment. "Ah."

"Wait. 'Ah,' what?! That was an 'Oops, I screwed up' ah, wasn't it?! What did you just do?!"

“Oh, huh, I never realized you have a mole here, Juu!”

“So what?! Nobody cares about moles!”

“Of course they do! There’s that whole *Jump* manga about them. What was it…? Kuroko’s Back Skin Mole?”

“*Basketball*! Kuroko’s *Basketball*! Totally different thing!”

“Okay, Juu, one more turn!”

“Gyaaahhh! It’s gonna tear! Something in my shoulder joint’s *definitely* about to give!”

Crack!

“Aaaugh! It tooore!”

That noise was horrific! Definitely not the sort of noise that human bodies are supposed to make! Of all the stupid ways to ruin your right arm! I deeply regretted the decisions that had led me to that point…but then it hit me that I wasn’t actually in any pain. What, did I wreck the joint so badly that my nerves have totally shut down?

Suddenly, I heard a snorting noise from across the room. Sayumi was doing her best to suppress a fit of giggles. In her hand was a recently broken pair of disposable chopsticks.

“E-Excuse me,” she stammered, “it seems I just so happen to have *accidentally* broken my chopsticks at *just* the wrong time… Pff ha ha ha ha!”

“‘Accidentally’ my rear!” That’d explain the snapping noise, but I’m positive she wasn’t eating anything you’d use chopsticks for! Did she seriously go hunting for a pair of them just to screw with me? What a jerk!

While I poked and prodded at my arm, relieved to find it still in one piece, Chifuyu trotted over to me. “What’s up?” I asked.

“I wanna draw too,” she replied.

“Huh? You mean you wanna draw a dark dragon on my arm?”

“Yeah. It looks fun.”

I guess that exchange might’ve been pretty entertaining from an outside perspective, yeah. I was still a little apprehensive, though.

“I appreciate the thought, but we’re not playing games here, y’know?” I explained in as serious of a tone as I could muster. I could tell that the other members were all thinking, “What *else* would you call it?” from their expressions alone, but I refused to let them throw me off and kept my deadpan firmly in place.

“That’s okay,” replied Chifuyu. “I’m *really* good at drawing.”

“You are?”

“My teacher says I’m my generation’s Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Ruiz y Picasso.”

“Why do you have Picasso’s full name memorized?! Couldn’t you just say ‘my generation’s Picasso’ and call it good?!” That’s so long, I bet even Picasso himself had a hard time remembering the whole thing! Chifuyu and her teacher are incredible!

“Oh, whoops—I meant ‘my generation’s Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Crispín Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Ruiz y Picasso.’ I forgot the ‘Crispín.’”

“You don’t have to correct yourself! Nobody would’ve even noticed! If that were a line in a book or a manga, most of the readers would’ve skimmed over it!”

“Anyway, I’m drawing a dark dragon.” Chifuyu clenched her little fist in a show of determination. She was chomping at the bit to draw that dragon.

I handed over the pen, and she got to work without the slightest hesitation. Apparently she really *was* a talented artist—a minute later, she exclaimed, “Done! A dark dragon.”

I took a look at my arm and found a ferocious black-scaled dragon staring back at me. It was shockingly well drawn. Like, seriously, if I had a hat, I’d have taken it off in admiration of her skill. She could make a great illustrator or manga artist someday. There was just one teeny, tiny little problem.

“This is a *Western* dragon!” Like, a capital-D *Dragon*! The sorta chubby ones with giant wings! Which has its own appeal, to be fair, but if you’re going to get an arm tattoo, it *has* to be a more Eastern-style dragon, right? “Umm, Chifuyu…? You did a great job, and this is a really good dark dragon, but I’d really like something less Dragonite, more Dragonair or Dratini, if you can do that.”

Chifuyu gave me a blank stare of incomprehension. “Not ringing any bells? Guess that reference didn’t clear the generation gap. What *would* make sense to you…? Ah, got it! Y’know the dragon in *The NeverEnding Story*? I want one like that!”

“Got it.” Chifuyu nodded enthusiastically, then quickly amended her drawing. “Done. The *NeverEnding Story* dragon.”

“Ooh, yeah, you nailed it! You…really…”

“I got all the details right.”

“Yeah…you sure did. You even drew the kid riding on it.” A kid was perched atop the dragon’s back, drawn with just as much detail as the dragon itself. Right off the posters, seriously. There was absolutely nothing dark or intimidating about it whatsoever.

“So, Chifuyu? Next time, do think you could—”

“I’m done.”

“Huh?”

“I’m bored. You’re boring, Andou.” With that, Chifuyu wandered off again. Ever the free spirit, that girl.

Man. Maaan. This must be how girls feel when they get toyed with and tossed aside as soon as the guy gets what he wants from them. I sat there for a moment, depressed by the tragic emptiness of my own existence, when I suddenly glanced up to find Sayumi looking right at me.

“Don’t suppose you can draw, Sayumi?” I asked, just for good measure.

“To an extent,” she replied. “I’ve been known to doodle every now and again.” She was being as outwardly modest as ever, but I knew her well enough to see through that attitude. If she said she could do something “to an extent,” there was an extremely high chance she was more or less a master in the field. You could never let your guard down around a superhuman like her.

“Okay, then come at me! Dark dragon, right on my arm! Bring it!”

“I have to say, that’s a rather irritating way to ask me for a favor…but fine, have it your way.” Sayumi took up my pen and quickly drew up a dragon on my arm. She obviously knew what she was doing. “Finished. He he—I have to admit, it’s a little embarrassing to have other people look at something I drew.”

The first thing that struck me about her dragon was the sharp glint in its eye. It was the expression of a conqueror, of one who rules over all who oppose them by sheer, brute force. Next up was its slicked-back hair, followed by its well-tailored, pure-white suit—

“Hey! This isn’t a dark dragon—it’s the main character of that one yakuza manga, *Hakuryu*!”

“Oh, excuse me! I was keeping the dragons that series features on its covers in mind as inspiration, and I must have gotten a little confused. Its title *does* mean ‘White Dragon,’ after all.”

“You’d have to be more than ‘a little’ confused to make a mistake like that! You did it on purpose, admit it!” Shirakawa Tatsuya, the young crime lord of the Kurosu-gumi yakuza syndicate, was glaring at me from my own arm. Frankly, it was freaky as hell. *Also, holy* crap *can Sayumi ever draw!*

“My apologies, Andou,” said Sayumi. “Here, I’ll fix it right away.”

“Great, thanks—hey! I see what you’re doing this time—you’re drawing Hakuryu, the famous actor who’s done a bunch of yakuza movies! And he looks just as scary as the last one did!” *What’s with the yakuza theme?! Just let it end—I don’t want a right arm I can’t bring myself to make eye contact with!* “Sayumi…at the very least, would you please stop drawing people? I just want a cool dragon. That’s all I ask.”

“A cool dragon? I believe I can do that…he he.” She agreed with a pleasant smile, but that little chuckle at the end gave me a really bad feeling. “Finished! I’ve drawn the coolest dragon I could manage.”

She wasn’t kidding. The dragon she’d drawn on my arm was just about as cool as they could get. Cool enough to set my heart aflutter and my soul ablaze! There wasn’t a man alive who could look at that dragon and not get at least a little hyped up! It was, after all…

“A Red-Eyes Black Dragon!” In terms of appearance, they’re even cooler than the Blue-Eyes, on account of, well, their red eyes! She’d even drawn it doing its signature Inferno Fire Blast!

“Ooh, man… The Red-Eyes Black Dragon: a level seven card with disproportionately low Attack Points and no monster effect on top of it,

which gets even less usable after the sacrifice system's introduced to the game!"

"No need for the exposition," interjected Sayumi.

"The Red-Eyes Black Dragon: a card that was first seen used by Dinosaur Ryuzaki, but was eventually claimed by Jonouchi and ended up getting treated as his trusted partner for no apparent reason as the manga's serialization dragged on!"

"Again, the exposition is unnecessary." I was overcome with emotion, but Sayumi was the very picture of composure. Actually, she might've been just a little bit weirded out by how incredibly positive my reaction was, considering she'd definitely meant it as a joke.

But whatever! Let her be weirded out! My right arm's hella cool now, and that's what really matters! Granted, the Red-Eyes was more of a Western dragon in form and technically didn't match up with the one I'd described, but it totally worked anyway, so I wasn't complaining.

While I was reveling in the awesomeness of my arm, though, Sayumi pulled a few tissues out of a nearby box and silently sneaked up behind me. "Burst Stream of Destruction!" she shouted, rubbing away the ink.

"Noooooo! M-My Red-Eyes had been defeated!" And beaten by a Blue-Eyes, at that! That six-hundred point difference in AP really is insurmountable! "How could you, Sayumi?!"

"My apologies. Seeing you act that happy was so viscerally disturbing that I simply couldn't restrain myself."

"*Ouch*! Just because you talk all formally doesn't mean you get a blank check to say anything you want, you know?"

"I believe anyone would agree that witnessing someone respond to harassment with joy is hardly pleasant."

"So, you really *were* trying to harass me, huh?"

"Isn't it obvious? I must admit that I miscalculated, though. In retrospect, the name 'Red-Eyes Black Dragon' alone is full of the sort of words you chuunis go wild for. I underestimated your capacity for edgy nonsense."

Sayumi, it would seem, held herself to pretty strict standards when it came to making fun of me. I spent a moment mourning the loss of my short-lived partner, only to notice that Tomoyo was staring at me with pity in her eyes. "What?" I snapped at her.

"Just thinking that nothing cures stupidity, that's all," she replied.

"Ohhh? You want to try drawing a dark dragon on my arm? You could've just said so!"

"Did you hear a single word I just said?!"

"Didn't have to—it's obvious from the way you've been staring at me! There's an unmistakable longing in your eyes!"

"No there isn't! And before you ask, no, I'm not just faking it 'cause I'm embarrassed!"

"You'll never improve your skills if you don't polish them, you know?"

“Why would I bother? Being able to draw dragons is totally useless!”

“It’d be handy for your New Year’s cards in the year of the dragon!”

“Oh, wow, once every twelve years! Amazing!”

This wasn’t working. It was time for a different approach. “Please! You’re the only one left I can rely on here!”

“Why’re you so desperate about this, you absolute wimp?!”

I mean, of course I am! I can’t exactly give up on it after coming this far—that’d mean all my efforts up until now were for nothing!

Tomoyo sighed, then she took up my pen. “All right, fine, I’ll draw it. C’mon, gimme your arm.”

“Tomoyo...I owe you one! No matter how many times I’m reborn, I’ll never forget this debt! I swear I’ll pay you back, even if I have to do it in the afterlife!”

“Do it in this life, please. God, I don’t know *why* I put up with this crap...” Tomoyo kept muttering complaints as she started drawing her dark dragon. “Hey, you’re going for something like Hiei’s arm in *YuYu*, right?” she asked, glancing up at me.

“Yeah,” I replied. She’d picked up on my sublime sense of aesthetics with shocking ease—must’ve been because she was a former chuuni herself. I was almost moved by how perfectly she’d understood my intent.

“Okay,” Tomoyo finally said. “It’s done. If you have any complaints, I don’t wanna hear them.”

“Oh, *wow*...” Tomoyo’s dragon wasn’t all that impressive on a technical level, but out of all the dragons I’d seen that day, it was far and away the closest to the image I’d had in mind. In short: she’d *nailed* the Hiei look.

“Mwa ha ha...” A malevolent dragon had been born within my right arm. Stained by the dark of night, it twisted around me, binding my very being to its will! *I have a dark dragon etched into my arm, and that’s* hella *cool.* “So, you’ve finally revealed your true form, *Dark and Dark*! How long have you raged within me, threatening to scorch me to ash should I let my guard down? How many times have you burned my hand with your sable flames? Indeed, I’ve been *burned* by you in more ways than one...heh!”

“Don’t laugh at your own stupid jokes! Seriously, ugh,” groaned Tomoyo.

“Gah—aaaugh! Be still, *Dark and Dark*! Now is not the time for your atonement!”

“Hey, if you’re gonna do the whole arm-clutching skit again, do it over in the corner. It’s really obnoxious.”

“Now then—with my dark dragon complete, the time has come to bandage it up and seal it away!” I pulled a roll of gauze out from my bag. I’d had a feeling I might have need of it today, so I’d brought it from home just in case. “Tomoyo! Bind my arm for me, will you? It’s really hard to do it myself.”

“Why on earth would I—”

“Ugraaahhh! H-Hurry! I can’t hold it back much longer...”

“Would you *please* just let your stupid power devour you already?!” In spite of her complaints, Tomoyo reluctantly bandaged up my right arm for me. She was always nice about that stuff when push came to shove. “Hey, I’m guessing you want them to be like Hiei’s curse bindings, right?”

“Yeah, thanks.” She really was quick on the uptake. Saved me a ton of effort. I almost fell for her on the spot.

Tomoyo crouched down in front of the chair I was sitting in and started winding the bandages around my arm. If this were a scene in some supernatural battle epic, it’d probably be one of those emotional moments where the wounded protagonist gets first aid from his kindhearted heroine.

Tragically, though, in my case, it was just the two of us horsing around. Ahh, man, looking at this from a more calm and objective perspective, it’s all pretty stupid. What am I even doing…? Screw it, though—I’ve come too far to back out now!

“You’re pretty good at tying these, by the way,” I said to Tomoyo. You wouldn’t think someone like her would have had many chances to practice.

“I used to do it for Hajime all the time, back in the day,” she explained.

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense. You did say he was on the track team. Oh, or maybe he got in a lot of fights? That’d be sorta surprising!”

“No, he…umm…” Tomoyo hesitated. Whatever she was trying to say, it wasn’t easy for her to spit it out. “Let’s just say the two of you have a lot of the same ideas.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, but internally, I was reflecting on the fact that he really *was* a true kindred spirit. Could *anyone* deny that bandages are super cool, though? You can wrap them around your arm, or your face, or even use them as an eyepatch like Takasugi in Gintama! They’re cool no matter what you do with them!

“Okay, done,” said Tomoyo.

“Thanks,” I replied. “Now I can get back into the fight!”

“Please do, and make it a suicide mission while you’re at it.”

The way she’d wrapped the bandages made them look sort of skewed and irregular. She hadn’t done a careless job, of course—it was a very deliberate level of untidiness, which made it look even better! *So friggin’ cool! The way little bits of bandage are hanging out here and there is just the best! Now then—with my seal complete, it’s time to move on to live combat!*

“Make us a *Field*, Chifuyu!” I shouted, doing my best to stay patient in spite of my excitement.

“What type?” she asked.

“Let’s see… Make it like one of those wastelands that they fought in all the time toward the end of *Dragon Ball*, when the author couldn’t be bothered to draw towns anymore!”

“I don’t get it.”

“Okay, then just a normal wasteland.”

“Got it.”

“Was the middle step *really* necessary?!” shouted Tomoyo.

Chifuyu turned to face the windows and held up a hand. The space in front of her started to warp and distort, and a moment later, the club room’s wall had disappeared, replaced with a landscape totally unlike that outside the windows. A massive, desolate wasteland spread out in place of the usual schoolyard.

Chifuyu’s ability, *World Create*, was so powerful she could even freely generate space itself. She’d willed the isolated wasteland into existence, then she’d designated the club room’s window-side wall as its entrance. The ability to make any setting she could possibly want was a terrifically powerful one, to be sure, but we only ever really used it to make baseball fields, skating rinks, and other places along those lines. Places to play around, basically.

“All right! Hey, Hatoko, c’mere a sec! It’s mock battle time!”

“All riiight!” replied Hatoko. The two of us changed into our outdoor shoes, which we kept in the club room for precisely this purpose, and stepped outside.

The wasteland expanded into the horizon, stretching as far as the eye could see in all directions. The sun was blazing high in the sky overhead, and an arid wind blew every once in a while. The bandages that dangled from my right arm danced in the gales of the plains. Dangling bandages: *hella* cool.

“Mwa ha ha!” I cackled, leisurely walking out into the open field before turning to face Hatoko. I did my best to engender an atmosphere of war-weary pathos as I launched into my speech. “How long has it been since the two of us met like this…? Ever since we—”

“Here goes! Laser beeeeeeam!”

Before my speech could even get rolling, a laser beam flew right at me. One of the elements *Over Element* gave Hatoko power over was light, and by hyper-condensing it, she could turn it into a projectile weapon!

I screamed like a banshee and hurled myself off to the side, just barely dodging the death ray. It scorched just a few centimeters past my side, sailing far off into the distance and blasting a mountain in the background to smithereens. If I had to pick a sound effect to describe the resulting noise, I’d probably go with something along the lines of *KRA-BWOOOOOOM*! *H-Hoooly crap...*

“What the hell, Hatoko?! You trying to kill me, or what?!”

“Huh? But you said we were having a mock battle!”

“Mock battle! *Mock*! As in, not actually a real battle! It’s just make-believe!”

“‘Make-believe’?”

“Ah, crap, not what I meant! It’s not make-believe—it’s a simulation! A super high-level simulation, yeah. Think of it in *Swords Aren’t Online* terms: ‘This might be a game, but nobody here’s playing around!’ You never know

when we might really need our powers, so we can't afford to let ourselves get sloppy!"

Hatoko grunted irritably. "I don't get this at all!"

"And most importantly," I said, ignoring her, "You can't just attack somebody when they're mid-speech! What the hell?!"

That was the part that had *really* set me off. The fact that her laser had darn near blasted my head off was a problem, sure, but interrupting my speech? *That* was a good way to piss me off for sure! *C'mon, you can't just ruin the scene like that!*

"Listen up, Hatoko. Your elementary school teachers taught you not to interrupt people when they're talking, didn't they?"

"They did, yeah… But aren't you also not supposed to listen to anything your enemy says when you're in the middle of a fight?"

She was absolutely right, and I couldn't think of a counterargument. *Crap! Since when was Hatoko this cheeky?*

"*Fool*!" I bellowed, ad-libbing it. "If there weren't so many people like *you* in this world, we wouldn't have to have wars anymore!"

"Wait, really?!"

"Indeed! If everyone just had the strength of character and open-mindedness to lend their ears to their enemy's words mid-battle, then, uhh, we'd probably have world peace by now or something!"

"I-Is that really how it works…?"

My strategy was to make some big, far-reaching claim, then move the conversation along before she could pry too deeply into it. Experience had proven that to be the best method of coping with Kushikawa Hatoko under these circumstances.

"Listen up, Hatoko. I've got a simpler example that should clear this all up for you."

"Okay."

"Think about *Anpanman*. Every episode, Bacteriaman does something to mess up Anpanman's head, but Uncle Jam bakes him a new one that he uses to save the day! Imagine, though, if Bacteriaman went ahead and messed up that *second* head too. That's not allowed, is it?"

"No way!"

"You'd think, 'Dude, seriously? You can't just ruin the story like that,' right?"

"I totally would!"

"And take *Mito Komon*—imagine if Kakunoshin were to whip out the special stamp case that proves that Komon's secretly the former vice-shogun, but the villain took one look at it and said, 'What the hell's that supposed to be?' You're just not allowed to *do* that, right?"

"You're not! You can't put poor Komon on the spot like that!"

"Okay, so things like these? We call them 'obligatory clichés.'"

"*Obligatory clichés*!" Hatoko parroted gleefully, her eyes sparkling. I just knew she was thinking about the term in its comedy context.

“You get it now, right? The comedians you love so much have clichés they have to play along with, just like Anpanman and all the supernatural battles he exemplifies.”

“Wait, is *Anpanman* a supernatural battle series?!”

“Of course it is! What else would it be? Anpanman himself is a battle-homunculus born by way of Uncle Jam’s Stand ability, y’know?”

“*Is* he?!”

“Why else would Uncle Jam mutter, ‘Bring forth new life, Golden Wind!’ under his breath every time he’s kneading the bread for Anpanman’s new head?”

“I’ve never heard him say that, and I never want to!”

“Anyway, the point is you always have to abide by the clichés!”

“Yeah, okay! I understand now: you can’t attack somebody while they’re talking.”

“And, uhh…maybe don’t make your attacks *quite* so full-force, okay?” I added in a much quieter tone of voice.

Mine aside, all of the literary club’s powers were god-tier. I didn’t like to admit it, but the truth was that, even if any of them were to only use a tenth of their full potential—actually, make that a *hundredth* of their full potential—they’d still be overwhelmingly more powerful than me.

Among those godly powers, Hatoko’s *Over Element* was notable for its sheer firepower. In terms of pure lethality, it was far and away the most potent out of all of them. One had to wonder what sort of messed-up twist of fate led to Hatoko, the club’s most gentle and mild-mannered member, getting the power that could obliterate mountains. We spent ages thinking about possible links between our powers and personalities back when they first awakened, but we never reached any satisfactory answers.

In any case, the time for long-winded theoretical conversation was over. It was *simulation* time!

“Mwa ha ha! How long has it been since the two of us met like this…?”

“Since yesterday!”

“Ever since we first laid eyes on each other, I had a feeling this day would come…”

“You mean back in kindergarten?”

“The time has finally arrived to prove once and for all what *really* makes the two of us different!”

“Well, you’re a boy and I’m a girl, for one thing!”

She’s just not gonna shut up and let me have this, is she? Well, whatever. Unleashing the power that dwells within my right arm comes first! I laid a hand on the bandage wrapped around my arm. The Malediction of Unleashing was gonna have to take the day off—I wanted to pour everything I could into making the bandage-removal scene as cool as inhumanly possible! One might say that sort of adaptability was my true power.

“There’s no going back now,” I said with a villainous smirk as I undid the bandages. “I don’t remember how to put these back on.” As the bandages fell away, the physical proof of *Dark and Dark*’s existence, the sinister dark dragon etched into my arm, was revealed…to have been rubbed most of the way out of existence. It was almost completely illegible.

Oh. Right. I guess we were using a water-based pen that whole time, so if you wrapped a bunch of bandages tightly around it, that would happen.

“Huh? Why’re you retying your bandages, Juu? I thought you said you didn’t remember how!”

“I-It just came back to me!”

“Oh, okay. Good for you!”

“Yup! Man, my memory’s so good, it’s kind of a problem sometimes!” I tried as hard as I could to re-tie the bandages before Hatoko saw the mess beneath them, but it was really hard to pull off with my left hand. The fact that I was in a state of panic didn’t help either, and the more I fiddled with them, the more the dark dragon got wiped away.

Maaan.

Y’know what? I’m done. I don’t even care anymore. The moment’s so dead, it’s not even funny. I plodded my way back into the room, collapsed into my chair and stared blankly up at the ceiling.

“Guess I shouldn’t expect to win the lottery if I never even bother to buy a ticket,” I sighed.

“What the *hell* were you trying to accomplish with all that?!” shouted Tomoyo, exploding right into my train of thought. She’d been watching my whole back-and-forth with Hatoko from the club room, and she’d apparently been getting more and more irritated by the second. Actually, that irritation might’ve been building up ever since I mentioned that I was drawing a dark dragon.

“Heh—a fair question,” I replied. “What *was* I trying to accomplish…? Maybe, when all was said and done, what I really wanted was for all of you to come and stop me…”

“Quit acting like a final boss who gets redeemed at the last second!”

“For real, though, sorry… The dark dragon you drew for me…got erased…”

“Don’t get all sincere with me either! And no apologies! I don’t actually care at all!”

“You don’t?! In that case, will you draw me a new one?!”

“Hell no!”

“Figures. Cheapskate.” I slumped back into my chair and groaned. “Guess this wasn’t a *total* waste of time, though,” I quietly added, glancing down at my bandaged right arm. At the very least, I’d reminded myself of how incredibly cool bandages could be under the right circumstances. *From now on, I think I might seal away* Dark and Dark *with cursecatcher bandages instead of sealing shackles.*

“Hey, Tomoyo, what do you think I should go with? Sealing shackles or cursecatcher bandages?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Oh, here we go! The classic ‘whatever you want’! Here’s a hypothetical for you, Tomoyo: imagine you’re out shopping with your boyfriend, and when you ask for his opinion on something, he tells you ‘whatever you want.’ It’d be super obnoxious, right? You really oughta consider stripping that phrase from your vocabulary!”

“Can it, chuuni. And actually, now that I think about it, isn’t all that ink gonna totally ruin those bandages if it rubs off on them?”

“Huh? Gah!” Crap, she’s right! I never actually asked if I could use these before I “borrowed” them from home too! “Oh man, I’m so screwed! My mom’s gonna kill me!”

I rushed back out into the wasteland. “Hatoko!” I shouted. “I need water, quickly! Help me out here!”

“Okaaay!” replied Hatoko, using *Over Element* to conjure up a burst of water that poured forth from her hands. I quickly washed the bandages, salvaging them before it was too late. The excess water splashed out into the wasteland, quickly soaking into its dessicated ground. It was a good thing we’d already had Chifuyu make the place for us, in retrospect; I would’ve had to run all the way over to the nearest faucet to wash them otherwise.

Once the bandages were all clean again, I carried a chair out from the club room and draped them over it. Considering how arid the place was, I figured they’d be dry in no time. “Witness the glory of *Over Element* and *World Create*’s Unison Skill: *Laundry Day*!”

Yeah, okay... I know I’m the one who came up with it, but that really is sorta lacking as far as Unison Skills go. Talk about a waste of godlike abilities.

“Hey, Andou,” Tomoyo said as I returned to my seat, freshly dried bandages in hand. “You’ve been going on and on about dark dragon this, dark dragon that today, right? Did you figure out how to make *Dark and Dark* do a form change or something?”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“Y’know, a form change. Like, making it change shape? Can you do that?”

Changing the shape of my flames...? Generally speaking, when I activated *Dark and Dark*, its flames appeared in the palm of my hand and could only be described as fire-shaped. I didn’t really put any effort into making them look that way. It just felt like the natural shape for fire to take, so I’d never thought about it much.

“Y’know,” I replied, “I’ve never actually tried.”

“You haven’t?” asked Tomoyo, sounding a little surprised. “When you started going on about the dark dragon thing, I was sure that meant you were gonna bring *Dark and Dark* out and make it dragon-shaped too.”

“Nah, I wasn’t really thinking that far ahead. I just thought that having a dragon tattoo—or even better, a birthmark—on my arm would be super cool.”

“You never bother developing your fantasies past the surface level, do you?”

“F-Fantasies? N-No clue what you’re talking about!” She’d really hit me where it hurt with that one, and my voice cracked as I tried to brush it off.

Altering the form of my flames, though—now *that* was an idea! It certainly seemed worth trying. *Dark and Dark* was totally useless for all practical purposes, but maybe the true essence of my power had secretly been its ability to change shapes this whole time!

“Okay, I’ll give it a try!” I declared, holding my right arm aloft and invoking *Dark and Dark* in its usual form to start. Its black flames immediately burst into being atop my hand.

“What happened to the Malediction of Unleashing?” asked Tomoyo.

“Oh. I-It, uh... I mean, today happens to be the one day of the year when my magical potential waxes full! I can use it without the Malediction today, no problem.”

“There you go, pulling plot beats out of your ass again... And back off before you use it next time! Your fire’s, like, sorta lukewarm in a really half-baked way that’s super obnoxious, somehow.”

“What?! I’ll teach you not to underestimate *Dark and Dark*’s true firepower! You might *think* it’s just sorta warm, but if you let your guard down and keep touching it for long enough, you’ll be in for one *hell* of a rash!”

“Wow, exactly as dangerous as a hot water bottle!”

I sharpened my senses, honing all of them in on manipulating the shape of my hot water bo—I mean, the shape of *Dark and Dark*. Deep within my mind’s eye, I visualized a dark, malevolent dragon. I willed it to *be*, packing all my fantasies, delusions, and flights of imagination into its realization!

“Graaauuuggggggghhhhhhhhh!” I bellowed, concentrating every ounce of my energy into the palm of my hand, willing the flame that danced atop it to bend to my desires. It...didn’t go super well. I was squeezing out every ounce of power I had to offer, but the most I managed was making the very tip of the flame sorta wiggle around a bit. It went back to normal the second I let my attention lapse too. But would I give up? Never!

“Frrraaahhhaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!” I shouted, invigorating my war cry to hitherto unseen heights. Bringing my strength and subtlety alike to bear, I kept fine-tuning *Dark and Dark*’s shape, over and over, until finally, its flame began to gradually change form.

“H-Hey, that’s enough, Andou! Give it a rest,” cautioned Tomoyo, but I was not about to be dissuaded.

“G-Gahaaahhhhhhh! D-Don’t try to stop me, Tomoyo! I understand that you fear for my life, but I cannot afford to falter here!”

“No, umm…I meant that you should stop because all that shouting’s getting on my nerves.”

“Mnraaahhhhhhuuuggghhh!”

“Hey, Chifuyu? The moron’s being loud again. Think you could soundproof the room so it doesn’t leak out…? Yeah, okay, perfect. Thanks.”

“Rin-pyo-toh-sha-kai-jin-retsu-zai-zen! Rin-pyo-toh-sha-kai-jin-retsu-zai-zen!”

“Why the ninja hand seals?!”

“Spiral staircase! Rhinoceros beetle! Desolation Row! Fig tart! Rhinoceros beetle! Via Dolorosa! Singularity! Giotto! Angel! Hydrangea! Rhinoceros beetle! Singularity! The secret emperor!”

“And now we’re going full JoJo again?! Why the fourteen phrases you need to get to heaven?!”

Gradually, ever so gradually, the flitting flame that adorned my hand morphed into the shape I desired. In some ways, the very essence of flame is freedom. Flame loathes to maintain a single shape for long, and alters its form incessantly. Perhaps that was why controlling it was proving much harder than I’d anticipated—I was attempting to reign in that very freedom. Still, though, I was starting to get the knack for it.

“Just a little more… Just a little…more…” A long, twisting dragon of flame danced atop my palm, but it wasn’t finished yet. I was just one step away, struggling to bring it to the point of perfection. “Damnations… I’m so close! Just a couple whiskers away from pulling it off…”

“Obsessive much?! Does it really matter if it has whiskers or not?!”

“Of course it does… The whiskers are what make a dragon a dragon… A dragon without whiskers just looks too, I dunno, snake-like… Think about Hiei again—his dragon totally has whiskers when he uses Dragon of the Darkness Flame…”

That said, I was clearly aiming for something higher-level than I actually had the skill to pull off. It was time for a compromise. Even if it didn’t have whiskers, as long as I gave it some horns, nobody would mistake it for a snake.

“All right! Finished!” I shouted triumphantly. A true to life dark dragon had finally manifested above my right hand. It was spectacular! It was ominous! It was sinister enough to make all who saw it tremble with fear!

H-Hooooly crap, that’s cool! Dark dragons are so! Friggin’! Cool!

There was just one problem, which Tomoyo was all too eager to point out. “Sure is tiny, huh?” she commented, glancing over at my hand with a sort of doubtful look on her face.

And, well, yeah. As far as dark dragons went, it was definitely on the miniature side. It was easily small enough to fit in my hand, and if I tried hard enough, I probably could’ve shoved it into a gacha capsule. It was as fiendish as it could be in terms of form, but thanks to its size, it came out looking sorta cute. A real palmtop dragon, as it were.

“Think you can make it a bit bigger?” asked Tomoyo.

“N-Nope… This is my limit… Heck, just keeping it in this shape’s pushing me over the brink…” Just a moment later, my concentration slipped; the dragon dispersed, returning my flame to its initial shapeless form. I was totally winded. “*Man*, that tired me out! Think I just shaved a solid five years or so off my lifespan.”

“Well, I guess you pulled off a form change, at least. Technically. Maybe? Y’know, honestly, I’m not sure if I’d call that ‘pulling it off’ or not.” Tomoyo rested her chin in her hand as she watched me gasp for air and analyzed my debatable success. “Looks like you’ll need to put in a lot more effort before you can shoot dragon- or phoenix-shaped fireballs, or whatever.”

“*Effort*? What a drag…” The effort I’d already put into shaping my flame had left me in a state of exhaustion. I could only imagine how much training and discipline I’d need to get it to the level I wanted (that being big enough to tower over me). Frankly, it didn’t seem worth the trouble.

Tomoyo saw through my laziness in an instant and scowled. Apparently, I’d touched a nerve. “You’re a disgrace, you know that? I don’t care if you give up on making a dragon, don’t get me wrong, but you could at least find *something* you can actually be motivated about.”

“You make that sound nice, sure, but don’t you know that hard work’s passé these days?”

“Oh, you have *got* to be—”

“No, hear me out. I get it! I know exactly how important hard work can be. But still, you’ve gotta admit that it’s out of style! Look at all the protagonists in manga and anime these days. Pretty much none of them ever actually put in any hard work, do they?”

Tomoyo growled with frustration, but it looked like my argument had hit home. She couldn’t find any way to argue against my claim. That was when Sayumi jumped into the conversation.

“You have a point, Andou, at least to some extent,” she said. “In manga, anime, and light novels—the ‘two-dimensional’ subset of fiction, if you will—it’s certainly true that most recent works have strayed away from the idealized portrayals of hard work you used to see.”

“Right? Protagonists these days all get sold as ‘perfectly ordinary high school students,’ but then they always turn out to have been born with some incredible innate superpower, or they get one handed to them out of nowhere one day. They don’t put in a lick of effort!”

It’s a common trope in supernatural battle stories in particular. The protagonist, who up until yesterday hadn’t thrown a punch in his life, ends up in a fight with some villain who’s spent their whole life enduring harsh, backbreaking training…and then the protagonist curb stomps them anyway. All of that pain and effort on the bad guy’s part is nothing in the face of the protagonist’s sheer talent and quick thinking. It’s one of the biggest failures of logic in the supernatural battle template, though it’s also a major part of the genre’s appeal.

“It’s not like there aren’t *any* stories where the protagonists go through training,” added Tomoyo in a thoughtful tone, “but the actual training sequences get cut down to next to nothing most of the time. You get, like, a montage at best.”

“And that would be because those sequences are boring for the readers, unless the author comes up with an especially interesting training method,” said Sayumi. “It’s much more common for the author to, say, have their main character suddenly use a new powerful technique, then later explain in a brief flashback how hard they worked to learn it. *Otokojuku* and *Prince of Tennis* used that method quite often.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Tons of stories just gloss over all the training stuff. The main character’s always just suddenly stronger than the bad guy for no real reason. It’s like they’re not even thinking about all this stuff.”

Surprisingly enough, both Tomoyo and Sayumi actually sided with me in the end. We were all in agreement that effort was out of fashion in the world of fiction.

“Most likely, the stories have changed to match the desires of their readers,” theorized Sayumi. “The desire to be popular with women, to save the world, to have your talents acknowledged by everyone…but to not have to put in any effort to achieve those goals. Fiction sells when it panders to the readers’ desires, and the current readership for that sort of work desires results without effort. That would explain why modern stories tend to hold the idea of hard work in disdain.”

“Speaking as part of the readership for that sort of story, I really *want* to object to that, but I honestly can’t.” It sort of felt like I was being called a disgrace again in a roundabout way, but everything Sayumi had said was so on-point I couldn’t think of any decent objections. So, that was sorta depressing, and Sayumi must have been able to tell my spirits were sinking.

“Oh, don’t misunderstand me. I didn’t mean to imply that having that sort of desire is a bad thing,” she said, trying to cheer me up. “The desire for results without effort is universal. Everyone feels it, to some extent, and it’s nothing to be ashamed of. It just so happens that attaining results without putting in effort is next to impossible in the real world, so people work hard in spite of themselves, even when the task at hand is a miserable one.”

She paused for a moment to consider her next words. “I suppose that would be why works of fiction don’t often portray the sort of miserable effort-sink that nobody wants to do in extensive detail. It simply wouldn’t be an entertaining experience, and it would come across as insufferably preachy to boot. Everyone knows why hard work is important without having it rubbed in their face by fiction.”

“Yeah, true enough,” I said, pondering her words. She was right. On some level, everybody understands that it isn’t possible to achieve results without putting in effort. You don’t need somebody to go out of their way to tell you that—it’s obvious.

That does not, however, mean that putting in effort is a matter of course. Nobody likes going through painful experiences, and if you don't want to do something, it can be pretty hard to convince yourself to do it anyway. Everybody wants to have it easy and take it easy.

"Oh, and of course, there's also the appeal of being a genius or awakening to sudden power," added Sayumi. "You can't get enough of those two, can you, Andou?"

"You bet I can't!"

Sayumi scowled. "The sheer enthusiasm with which you agreed to that was incredibly irritating. Please don't."

Needless to say, I ignored her protests and kept going. "Most protagonists are geniuses in one way or another, right? Even if the story has a part where they put in the work and go through intense training, it always ends with one of the other characters being all, 'Incredible! It would take a normal person a whole year to master that skill, and they did it in a single month!' They get to show off their genius side, even when effort's involved!"

"True," said Sayumi, agreeing with me again. "Everyone can understand the appeal of being a genius. The appeal of going through an awakening, meanwhile, hardly even bears explaining. It's self-evident that a character who spends all their time working as hard as they can would be less attractive to the typical reader than a character who suddenly obtains unimaginable power when all hope seems lost. It's easier on the author, as well. Having your protagonist awaken to incredible power lets you overturn all precedent and foreshadowing in an instant."

She really didn't have to add that bit of unfiltered pragmatism at the end, in my book. Sayumi never got tired of smashing my dreams with relentless realism. She was right about one thing, though: awakenings are *awesome*. They're easy for creators to work into a story, and consumers eat them right up! Could they possibly get any handier?! No wonder they're in fashion!

"People, especially young people, are attracted to the idea of accomplishing something without putting in an incredible amount of effort. I imagine it's rather difficult to understand the appeal that effort itself carries until you've reached a certain degree of age and experience," said Sayumi, summarizing her overall conclusion before taking a long, leisurely sip of tea, as if to say that the conversation was over.

"Remind me again…*how* old are you, exactly?" I asked, unable to stop myself.

"I'll be eighteen in the very near future," she replied with a smile.

"Okay, lemme see if I got all that," said Tomoyo, looking like she was still putting it all together in her mind. "When people are young, they tend to think of themselves as geniuses, so they like seeing genius characters and plot developments that make them look OP AF. The older they get, though, the more they realize their own limitations and accept the fact that they're just ordinary people, so they start losing interest in all that stuff."

That last part sorta hit home for me. When I considered that it was coming from Tomoyo, a girl who had already renounced her chuuni phase, something about it felt *tragic* in a way I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Part of me thinks that I just might be some sort of special, incredible person. I *want* to think that. I *want* to believe it. But deep down, a part of me's always been afraid that someday, I might come to the realization that I'm just *me*. A perfectly ordinary person, and nothing more.

Tomoyo looked a little downcast about her conclusion, but Sayumi shook her head. "No. I believe that, ultimately, it's all a matter of personal taste," she stated bluntly. Not that I was about to disagree with her, blunt delivery or not.

I sighed deeply and stared vacantly at my right arm. "Maybe I should put a little more effort into changing *Dark and Dark*'s form after all."

Tomoyo grinned in the way she always did whenever she was about to make fun of me. "What, haven't you heard? Hard work's passé these days!"

"It is, and I learn more by putting stuff into practice than by working hard at it, *and* I'm the sorta uber-protagonist who goes through sudden awakenings when he's in dire peril, so honestly, I don't *need* to put in any effort at all! But, well…there's no harm in giving it a try, y'know? Someday, I'll bring forth the coolest dark dragon you've ever seen—the sort of dragon that really would etch its mark into my right arm!"

"Gotta say, you've picked the worst possible thing to put in hard work for," sighed Tomoyo.

"I think it's quite nice, actually," said Sayumi in an understanding tone of voice. "I don't believe in wasted effort. Or rather, from another perspective, *every* effort is a waste, in a broad sense. Take, for instance, a member of a baseball club who has no interest in going pro but practices with exceptional enthusiasm anyway. Some might say that they're wasting their effort, but I'm of the opinion that saying so would be rather tactless."

"Sure, but…it still feels like the stuff Andou puts effort into doesn't quite fall into the same category…" Tomoyo was floundering, and I was just astonished. It wasn't every day that Sayumi took my side in this sort of debate, and I was a little happy about it.

"Let me put it this way, Tomoyo," said Sayumi. "When a child tells you that they want to be Ultraman or a Kamen Rider when they grow up, it's an adult's duty to stay quiet and not contradict them."

"Oh, okay. I get it now."

Never mind. Turns out she was just treating me like a kid. Hmph! Let them treat me however they want—my own hard work will never betray me! When all is said and done, today is just my first step along the boundlessly long road that stretches ahead of me. I can't even imagine how many days or months I'll spend training myself to materialize the dark dragon of my dreams, but as long as I keep piling on the effort, I'll reach my goal without fail!

“Heeey, Juu!” Hatoko’s voice broke me out of my passionate and resolute internal monologue. She sounded sort of distant—probably still out in the wasteland. I wondered why she hadn’t come back into the club room yet and turned around…only to freeze solid.

“Is this the sorta dragon you want to make?” asked Hatoko from within the coils of a dragon made of pure flame. Her dragon was sinister, but in a way that had a certain air of holiness to it, and it was cool beyond all possible reason.

Yeah, it had whiskers. Yeah, it had horns. And it was easily over a hundred meters long.

The massive crimson dragon wheeled through the air, the very picture of purgatory itself. At the very center of that inferno stood Hatoko, smiling as casually as ever.

“I wanted to make it black like yours, but, well, y’know!” she explained. *Over Element* couldn’t make black flames. It gave her power over the forces of nature, and black fire doesn’t occur in the natural world. That’s part of what makes *Dark and Dark* so friggin’ cool, but in that moment, it was also the last thing on my mind.

“Hatoko…” I stammered. “That… What… *How…?*”

“Dunno! I just gave it a try, and it worked!”

She just gave it a try, and it worked. I worked myself to the brink of exhaustion to make a palmtop dragon, and Hatoko managed to make my ideal dragon in no time at all.

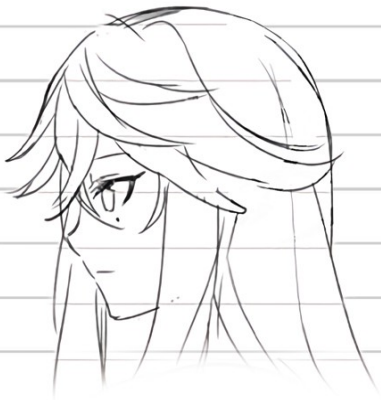
“Here goooes! Dragon attack!” At Hatoko’s command, the crimson dragon jetted off at an incredible speed and crashed into the far-away foothills. I had no clue how hot that thing must’ve been, but at the very least, it was hot enough to melt away an entire mountain. Its heat, firepower, destructive potential, speed, and—most importantly—aesthetics were all absolutely ten out of ten by my standards.

And so, my motivation was pulled out by the roots. Reality had slapped me in the face with a genius that no amount of effort could ever overcome. *Maybe this is how Yamcha and Krillin felt when they finally gave up on catching up to Goku…?*

“Putting in the effort’s a drag after all,” I mumbled as I sunk as deep into my chair as I could manage. Tomoyo and Sayumi didn’t say a thing, but I could see the pity in their eyes.

CHARACTER FILE 04

A discerning appreciation for boys' love is the mark of a well-mannered lady.



Takanashi Sayumi
Senkou High, third year, class 2
Blood type: A
Route of Origin

Hers is the power of restoration.

Sayumi can restore anything she touches to the way it's meant to be. "The way it's meant to be" is determined by her own subjective judgement.

Route of Origin's potential for direct attacks is virtually nil. A more bog-standard healing ability might let the user overheal their enemies to the point it actually hurts them, but since Sayumi's power is more of a reset than an actual heal, that's out of the question for her.

Not that any of that matters, since she's stupidly dangerous even without a supernatural power backing her up. Like, supposedly, her vision's so good she can even pick out the stuff that Tomoyo does at super speed. I swear, the girl's not even human.

Chapter 5: Universal Crane Game Theory

One afternoon, I was walking through the hallways with a can of black coffee I'd bought from the vending machine by the school store. The goal was to show off how I'm one of those cool dudes who only drinks their coffee black to anyone who happened to pass by me, so I'd refrained from stowing it away in my pocket like I usually would.

I strolled about with the can in hand, taking what could be *very* generously described as the scenic route, when I happened to spot Sayumi standing by a staircase. She was talking with a girl I didn't recognize. I briefly assumed they must be friends, but on a second glance, it didn't strike me as the friendliest of conversations. I could tell they were both on edge, even at a distance.

I kept watching until the mystery girl went on her way, leaving Sayumi behind to heave a weary sigh. I walked over and called out to her.

"Hey, Sayumi!"

"Oh, hello, Andou."

"Who was that you were talking to just now? Friend of yours?"

"I…suppose you could say that. That was Kudou Mirei, the president of the student council. "

"Oh, huh." I'd never actually seen her in person before. I'd never had any interest in her at all, really, and was sort of surprised to find that she was kind of a total babe. "Wait a second. If that was the president of the student council, and the two of you were talking about something uncomfortable, does that mean…?"

"It does indeed. We were discussing the literary club."

I'd already heard about how our club was on the student council's bad side. Being our president, Sayumi had probably been going through a lot of trouble on account of them while we weren't around.

"So, she's one of *their* pawns," I spat. "Pretty roundabout of them to send in their flunky and hit us in our weak point instead of taking us on directly."

"Quite."

"Though, on the other hand, no matter what incredible powers our foes might wield, they're all naught but ash in the wind in the face of the ebony blaze of annihilation, *Dark and Dark*!"

"Indeed. Reduced to a scattering of protein powder." That was an incredibly slipshod retort by Sayumi's standards, and the look in her eyes told me that she was in no mood to put up with my antics. I decided to shift back into normal mode.

"Surely they're not gonna try to shut down the club, or anything?"

“No, I don’t believe we have to worry about that. We might want to start adjourning slightly earlier than usual, though.”

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense. We *do* tend to stick around pretty late.” It wasn’t like we were doing it on purpose, but we’d been making a habit of lingering in the club room for longer than we were technically supposed to be. It was a little too comfortable of a hang-out spot for our own good.

“We also might want to think about deciding on a new club activity to engage in. The yearly magazine we publish might be somewhat lackluster on its own.”

“A new activity, you say…?”

And so, the day moved along, and eventually we found ourselves in the club room after school.

“All right,” I said, addressing my clubmates, “anyone who has an idea for a new club activity, hands up!” For some reason, I always seemed to end up being placed in charge of our group discussions, and that day was no exception. Unfortunately, that time I didn’t get a single hand raised in response.

“A new activity, huh? Honestly, I’m not super into the idea,” griped Tomoyo, leaning back so far in her chair that it was balanced precariously on its back legs.

“Agreed,” droned Hatoko, who was lying cheek-down on the table. “I don’t really wanna do any big new activities. I wanna take it easy, like we’ve always done.”

“That’s enough of your lip, you indolent swine!” I shouted, paused, and corrected myself. “Is what I *would* say, but honestly? Same.”

I didn’t want to do anything new either. We all joined this club because we didn’t want to do a bunch of club stuff in the first place, so it was no surprise that the suggestion that we come up with a new activity was met with a resounding “meh.” I glanced around the room, meeting the glazed-over gazes of my clubmates, until finally I came to Chifuyu, who was sitting around and hugging Squirrely as usual.

“Guess you don’t really have to worry about this, huh, Chifuyu?” I mused. I’d almost forgotten that she wasn’t actually a member of the club to begin with. She hadn’t contributed to the previous year’s literary club magazine either, needless to say.

Chifuyu didn’t look very happy about my comment, though. She pursed her lips and let out an irritated huff. “That’s not true!”

“Huh? But…”

“Don’t exclude me!” she snapped, puffing out her cheeks in a pouty little frown. Okay, now that’s just adorable. What is this cute little creature that’s made its home in our club room? I wanna take it home and squeeze it every night before I go to sleep!

“Yeah, fair enough. Sorry, Chifuyu. You’re a member too.”

“Good.”

“But tell me, Himeki Chifuyu—are you certain you have the resolve to join us? Know that once you’ve been accepted into our fold, you shall live the rest of your life cloaked in shadows! Are you prepared to renounce the light of day and descend into our accursed fellowship?”

“No thanks.”

Well, that was an unreserved refusal. Guess Chifuyu defies the stereotype about Japanese people not knowing how to say “no.” No need to worry about her getting taken in by any scammy door-to-door sales pitches in the future!

“In that case, let’s amend our itinerary. Our new goal is to come up with an activity that Chifuyu can participate in,” said Sayumi.

I took a moment to think about it, and before long, an idea popped into my head. “I know—how about a story relay? We’ve done those before, remember? They were pretty fun.”

It was a good suggestion, if I may say so myself. Last time, we’d only had four people to participate, so adding Chifuyu in would give us more opportunities to expand the story.

“If we decide on a theme in advance and really put some effort into it, we could put it all together in the end and print it out like the magazine! That’s totally the sort of activity a literary club would do, don’t you…huh?” Suddenly, I realized that all three of the other high schoolers in the room were grimacing at me. “Wh-What’s wrong, guys?”

“I was remembering the last time we did a story relay, that’s all…” said Tomoyo.

“Huh? What do you mean? Wasn’t it fun?”

“For *you*, maybe.”

She’s not serious, right?! I quickly glanced around at the others, only to find Sayumi and Hatoko nodding vigorously in agreement.

“Think about it,” continued Tomoyo. “Remember the time we had you wrap up the story?”

Hmm. Let’s see here... Sayumi had gone first, and she wrote about a meeting between two main characters: a young girl named Satomi who was ravaged by a terrible illness and a young boy named Yuuki who’d been crushed by the weight of his own dreams. It was a sort of played-out setup, but her writing really sold it. It felt like their meeting was the work of destiny, and you could just tell that there was some sort of heart-rending plot twist waiting for them in the future.

Hatoko was up next, and she used her turn to describe the comedic exploits of the two in their daily lives. Her part didn’t exactly move the story forward, but it did a great job of illustrating how Yuuki was becoming gradually more and more charmed by Satomi as the days passed by.

Tomoyo went third, and she wrote a scene in which Satomi’s illness took a sudden turn for the worse. She also took the opportunity to describe exactly how Yuuki’s dreams had been shattered, expertly picking up the foreshadowing about his tragic past that Sayumi had set up way back in the

first part. She made Yuuki finally overcome his own past and sneak into the hospital late at night to pay a visit to Satomi.

"Then *you* took over," groaned Tomoyo.

"Right."

"There were pretty much two directions you could've taken the story in: coming up with some contrivance to save the heroine's life, or playing it straight and having her die in the end."

"I guess that's how your typical incurable illness story would probably play out, yeah."

"And what was it you *actually* wrote?"

"Well, I had it turn out that Satomi was actually the direct descendent of a cursed bloodline that traced back to the evil gods of time immemorial, which granted her the malevolent power of *Neo Ragnarok*, and that her incurable illness was the first sign of that power's inevitable awakening, but at the same time, Yuuki also finally recovered the memories of the many, many past lives he'd lived through before being reincarnated in his current form, including one in which he'd been in love with one of Satomi's previous incarnations, meaning that he now had to put his life on the line in the modern day to fight to save the girl he loves using the combat skills he retained from his innumerable past lives."

"Why the *hell* did you shove your chuuni battle BS into a story that was one scene away from wrapping up on a really nice note?!"

"I didn't wanna make the ending too cliché! I thought it'd be boring."

"Just because it's original doesn't mean it's good!"

"Whaaat? But I thought I did a really great job on that one!"

Satomi: "Please...kill me! You have to, or else the power of *Neo Ragnarok* will bring the entire world to ruin! Do it, before I lose myself! Do it!"

Yuuki: "I can't! After all these lives I've lived, I've finally found you again... I can't do this..."

Satomi: "But you must! Kill me, and be the hero that saves the world!"

Yuuki: "How am I supposed to choose between saving the world...and saving you...?"

"A world on the brink of ruin! The clock ticks; a decision must be reached! Tears flow! Emotions roil! And when the time comes, which will the boy choose: the world, the girl, or something else entirely...? *To be continued!*"

"No, it won't be continued! You were supposed to wrap the story up, not drop a sequel hook!"

"What else was I supposed to do? Satomi's *Neo Ragnarok* was way too mighty an obstacle to overcome in a single volume. You gotta roll with the power inflation."

“You can’t use the ridiculous backstory to defend yourself when you’re the one who came up with it!”

“You know what they say—sometimes it feels like your characters practically write themselves!”

“Don’t you mean ‘sometimes your characters blow off all the foreshadowing you established themselves’?”

“Man, nitpick much…? Who cares? Setting up foreshadowing’s way more exciting than resolving it anyway! How many works of fiction out there *actually* resolve every last little plot thread that they set up?”

“I…hate that I can’t argue against that.” One of my arguments finally got through to her, and Tomoyo was left without a leg to stand on. It didn’t take her long to come up with another complaint to change the topic with, though. “*Anyway*, the point is, after that disaster of a relay, we decided that we couldn’t leave finishing the story to you and made you go first instead.”

“Oh, right, I guess that did happen.”

If memory serves…

The year: 30XX AD. After suffering a crushing defeat at the hands of a race of unknown, ultra-powerful lifeforms called the Arysgears, the dwindling remainder of humanity has been driven underground and now dwells in a colossal subterranean city known as Elysium. The society of Elysium is carefully regulated and dominated by its primary governing body, commonly referred to as Central Control.

For years, Central Control has worked to refine an amalgamation of magic and machine technology into a brand-new combat style called Autonomancy in the hopes of one day reclaiming the surface world from the Arysgears. The select few humans capable of wielding this power (commonly referred to by the public as Auto-Knights) are trained for battle in a special academy, and it is there that we meet our protagonist, Signa L. Shigure.

Though his peers at the academy perceive Signa as a washout and a failure, in truth, his practical combat ability far exceeds that of a typical student. Signa, after all, is the product of a human experimentation program carried out in the utmost of secrecy by Central Control. Within him dwells the genetic code of the very Arysgears he has trained to do battle with.

Thanks to the influence of his altered DNA, whenever Signa loses himself to his emotions, he also loses the ability to suppress his latent power. As such, he has chosen to pretend to be a washout and avoid combat as much as possible.

Signa, however, has caught the eye of a group of violent revolutionaries that oppose Central Control’s authoritarian rule, ZEED, as well as an underground religious organization that harbors the fanatical belief that the Arysgears are the true and just rulers of the Earth, the Children of the Azure Flame.

ZEED seeks to use Signa to bolster their fighting force and strike back against Central Control. The Children of the Azure Flame believe him to be the bridge that will one day unite humanity and the Arysgears as one. And Central Control, of course, has its own ideas about our hero's future.

The true nature of Signa's accursed destiny, however, will only be revealed the day he meets a solitary girl with no name of her own.

"You're a man, aren't you?! Then prove it! Show some backbone and save the world, already!"

And so, a boy who refused to fight takes to the battlefield for the sake of the girl he owes everything…

"The backstory was a goddamn novel in and of itself! What the *hell* were we supposed to do with *that*?!"

"I mean, I dunno! You're supposed to figure that out yourself! That's the whole point of a story relay, isn't it?"

"Like hell we could! If that were the setup for a light novel, it'd take like twenty volumes to wrap it up, minimum! It'd *definitely* be one of those series that spends all of volume one just introducing the characters!"

When she put it that way, I had to admit that I might've laid the backstory on a bit thick for the purposes of a story relay. If you told *me* to write the continuation to that, I'd say it was impossible too.

"And the worst part's that it actually sounded pretty interesting…" Tomoyo muttered under her breath.

"Wait, seriously? You liked it?"

"N-No! No, I didn't! I-I mean, just a little bit!"

I grinned and chuckled a quiet "Mwa ha ha." I *knew* that, deep down, Tomoyo appreciated my sense of aesthetics. She really was an invaluable member of the team to have around. She was a lot less ready to admit it, though, and kept trying to correct herself in a gradually escalating raised voice.

"If we *actually* tried to run with this giga-chuuni crap for a story relay, it would *have* to end up being some sort of ridiculously grimdark tragedy unless we ignored literally everything you established!"

"Yeah, okay, I can't deny that there was a *pretty* high probability the backstory would railroad you into writing something tragic."

"You'd better not, 'cause the probability was stupid high! Like, a hundred percent!"

"Let's put it at 'as likely as the protagonist and heroine of a light novel deciding to go to an arcade and play a crane game if they ever end up going out together on their own.'"

"And exactly what would that likelihood be?! In numbers!"

"'Bout a hundred percent, give or take."

"Is it, really?!"

It really is! But why is that, anyway? Going to an arcade and playing a crane game's an *awful* idea for a date, no question about it. The odds are heavily in favor of you trying to catch a stuffed toy, failing, getting super tilted, sinking way too much money into the machine, and seriously weirding out the girl. Or, at least, that's pretty much how it went the one time I went to an arcade with Hatoko...

That grim memory took me out of the conversation and into a pit of depression, and Sayumi stepped in to begin another of her trademark explanations.

"Consider, if you will, the primary readership for light novels. I think it's reasonable to claim that your typical light novel reader would have a hard time imagining what it would be like to take someone out on a date. Arcades, on the other hand, would be an area of intimate familiarity. Furthermore, having your main character play a crane game allows him to display both his skill and his kindness, and it gives the heroine a chance to break out of the steely front she usually puts on and contrast it with girlishness as she dotes on an adorable stuffed animal. I believe those are the effects most authors are aiming for."

Her explanation was clinical and practical to a fault, as usual, but I had to admit that it was also really convincing. Crane games really are something, huh? They're a universal storytelling solution, even. I think I'll count them as one of the three pillars of light novels, along with awakenings and the protagonist's best friend. We've been over awakenings, of course, but we'll have to cover the protagonist's best friend some other time.

"Y'know, come to think of it, we haven't gone out to play crane games in ages!" said Hatoko, cheerfully striking up a side conversation with me. "You remember that time you spent five thousand yen to win me a stuffed bear? I still have it!"

"Ugaaah!" Way to gouge open an ancient scar! Completely accidentally too. That might be a charming little memory to laugh about from your perspective, Hatoko, but for me, it's a deep-seated regret that I feel keenly to this very day...

My descent into the depression pits had reached terminal velocity, and Sayumi stepped in to moderate the conversation in my place. "Let's get back on topic, shall we? To begin with, I have a proposal in regards to any future story relays: 'leave Andou out of the rotation.' All in favor?"

"Aye!"

My exclusion was passed by a unanimous vote. Isn't bullying supposed to happen, like, behind the scenes, not right in your face...?

"In all practicality, though, I believe that polishing and publishing a relay story would be difficult in a number of ways," said Sayumi. "To begin with, most of the fun in that sort of story comes from personally knowing everyone who contributed to it."

Tomoyo nodded in agreement. “True enough—the ones we did were all full of in-jokes that only we’d get. What else could we do, though…? Any ideas, Hatoko?”

“Hmm…” Hatoko folded her arms and fell into thought for a moment. Finally, her face lit up and she clapped her hands. “Hey, Sayumi? Right now, our goal’s to make the president of the student council stop complaining about us, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Coming up with a new activity was just a means to that end. It isn’t our goal in and of itself.”

“Okay then, why don’t we just tell her to stop? We can all go together and ask her to please cut us a break!”

It was the worst plan I could possibly think of, but at the same time, I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was a certain element of profound wisdom to it. It was, in short, a very Hatoko solution.

Tomoyo looked skeptical, in a confused sort of way. “Hatoko… I’m, uhh, not so sure about that one.”

“That’s right!” I jumped in, backing Tomoyo up. “The student council president’s one of *their* pawns! My pride won’t allow me to bow down to one of *them*, even if I know I’m just faking it!”

“Shut up, Andou,” snapped Tomoyo.

Hatoko, meanwhile, was upset about being dismissed that easily. “Hmph! I thought it was a great idea,” she whined.

I pondered the feeling I’d had a moment before. “Actually, you know…Hatoko *does* sort of have a point. We don’t *have* to just do what the president says. Nothing’s stopping us from approaching this problem from a totally different angle!” Just a moment later, a brilliant idea struck me. “Got it! You should hack her computer, Tomoyo! There’s gotta be dirt somewhere in there we can use against her!”

“As if I could!”

“Wait, you mean you can’t?”

“Why does that surprise you?!”

“You spend all your time fiddling with your laptop, right?”

“That doesn’t mean I know how to hack! No way a high schooler would have the technical skills to pull something like that off!”

“But there are tons of them in manga and anime and stuff! Like, a shocking number of them! You see high schoolers who happen to be genius hackers or inventors all over the place.”

“Yeah, in *fiction*!”

“Man, for real? You’re always carrying that thing around with you, so I was sure you were some sorta secret pro hacker, or whatever…” I sighed.

“Quit acting disappointed! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

As Tomoyo and I bantered away, I was struck by a sudden thought about her half brother, Kiryuu. I remembered him mentioning that he’d been a member of this club when he was in high school as well. Maybe he’d had to deal with the same sort of problems that we were confronting?

Just then, my pondering was interrupted by the unshakable feeling that somebody was watching me. I glanced over to the side, only to find that Sayumi was leaning in uncomfortably close and trying her best to stare a hole in my face.

"Whoa! Wh-What's up, Sayumi?" I asked.

"I smell something," she muttered.

"Wh-What do you mean, you *smell* something?!"

"My BL sense is tingling."

"Your *BL sense*?! What the heck is that?!"

"A perfectly ordinary sense that all girls are equipped with."

I shot Tomoyo a "For real?" sort of look, and she responded with a "Hell no!" head-shake. Sayumi, however, was extremely confident about the leap of logic she'd made.

"Andou—you've fallen for a man, haven't you?!"

"I've *what*?!" It was so abrupt, I completely lost my train of thought. *Seriously, where did* that *come from?*

"You've gone through a conspicuous change over the past several days. You've grown suddenly *adultlike*, one might say; you're exuding a fascinating air of immorality that I've never seen in you before."

"I-Is that so…?"

"The explanation is clear: you've fallen in love and gained the allure of maturity that comes along with it!"

I had absolutely no idea what the hell she was talking about. She was *probably* complimenting me, best as I could tell, but as rare as it was for a girl to praise me, I wasn't actually happy about it at all. Weird, that.

"Have you perchance met with an especially remarkable gentleman recently, Andou?" she pressed.

"I mean, when you put it that way, I *did* have a destined meeting with a super hot guy just the other day…"

"Did you just say it was *destined*?!"

"What? Wait, no! I mean, like, chuuni, edgy destined, not girly, romantic destined!" *Crap! I'm so flustered, I just accidentally admitted that I'm a chuuni!* "Cut me some slack, Sayumi! I'll admit that I *really* like the guy, and that I've been thinking about him whenever I have a spare moment lately, and that I find myself wondering whether he'd like new titles I come up with, and that I keep wishing that we could meet up and chat again. But that's all, really!"

"If that wasn't a perfect description of what it's like to be in love, then I don't know what is!"

"Wait. Holy crap, you're right!" *This is love! I've fallen for Kiryuu! Apparently, I'm* way *less self-aware than I give myself credit for!* "Hoooly crap, for real? I'm in love with a guy? So, that means…I'm…"

Overwhelmed with shock and despair, I sank to my knees. I felt a gentle hand come to rest upon my shoulder, and I looked up to find Sayumi watching over me with a smile that could only be described as saintly.

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about, Andou. Or rather, it’s *okay* to be embarrassed about it! Being in love’s embarrassing, regardless of your age and identity.”

“Sayumi… I’ve been living a lie, but it’s all so clear now! You’ve opened my eyes to my own inner self—the truth is that I…I…I’m actually into—”

“Like *hell* you are!”

Instantly, I felt a barrage of blows rain down across my entire body. I’m not talking one after another either. I must have been hit over ten times, but every single one of them landed simultaneously, and I got to feel their full force in perfect unison. The only person I knew who was capable of a feat like that, of course, was the girl who ruled over time herself.

“Ugh, augh… Damnations! *Closed Clock*, how dare you subject me to your Prison of Instants!”

Allow me to explain! The Prison of Instants is a special move that Kanzaki Tomoyo’s only capable of using when her pent-up stress reaches critical mass…at which point it activates automatically. It’s an instantaneous flurry of blows that comes coupled with a verbal comeback. It doesn’t actually do any real damage at all, granted, but it’s not the sort of sensation you’d normally feel in your day to day life, and it’s kinda off-putting in a way I can’t quite put my finger on.

“Listen up, jerkwad!” Tomoyo bellowed. “Joke around all you want, but don’t you *dare* go dragging my brother into your crap!”

“I-It’s not like I’m super into your brother, or anything!”

“Don’t go tsundere on him either!”

“I, well, I mean… Sorry,” I said, dropping the act. “You’re right, we were just joking around, like always. Right, Sayumi? You weren’t serious about any of that stuff, were you?”

“Quite,” Sayumi agreed. “It was all just a joke. No need to take it so seriously. I may be into that sort of thing, but unlike some women of my predilections, I’m not prone to mixing up my fantasies with reality… Tch.”

Was it just me, or did she do the little irritated tongue click thing at the end there? She did, didn’t she? Did she think we wouldn’t notice?

“Tomoyo has a brother?” commented Hatoko, who looked a little astonished. “And you met him, Juu?”

“Oh. Well…” *Whoops.* I’d been so caught up in the conversation I hadn’t even considered it could end up spilling the beans about her brother.

She hadn’t told me not to talk about him or anything, but it was pretty obvious that the family situation in the Kanzaki household was sorta complicated, and I’d thought it’d be best not to go spreading around what I knew. I’d managed to avoid mentioning him to anyone up to now, but, well, so much for that.

“My bad,” I muttered, glancing over at Tomoyo.

“It’s fine. Actually, it bothers me more when you act all weird about it,” she casually replied. Then she gave a quick and easy explanation to everyone about how I’d happened to run into her brother the other day.

Hatoko still seemed keenly interested. “Hmm… What does your brother do, Tomoyo? Is he in college? Or does he have a job?”

I’m sure she meant it as perfectly benign small talk, but at that point, Tomoyo’s expression stiffened up. *Oh jeez, Hatoko, way to open up a can of worms…*

“M-My brother, umm…works, uhh, part…partially…?”

Oof. Not even part-time. I guess he did say something about getting fired, huh?

“In short, the man Andou fell for is none other than Tomoyo’s very own brother? What an incredible twist! What other soap-opera-worthy developments will we witness before this is over?!”

“Why do you look so excited all of a sudden, Sayumi?!”

“No way… Juu, do…do you really have a crush on him…?”

“And why do *you* look like the world’s about to end, Hatoko?!”

“But Juu, when we were little, you promised that when we grow up, you’d—”

“Marry you or something, probably, right? Look, we were kids. That wasn’t—”

“—force my powers to awaken, unleash all of my latent potential, and help me be reborn as the Phoenix of Eternal Darkness!”

“Did I seriously say that?!” *I mean, I would! I* absolutely *would!*

The club room had more or less devolved into chaos at that point. Within all the commotion, the one member who’d spent the entire conversation up to that point in a zonked-out stupor finally decided to break her silence with a monotone mumble.

“So, what’s our new club activity?”

The high school contingent clammed up in unison. There we were, getting called out by a grade schooler. Our conversation had veered so far off-topic that the topic had long since faded away beyond the horizon.

Not that that was anything new for us.

We kept the meeting running for a while longer, but in the end, we adjourned without ever settling on a decent idea.

“Let’s call it a day,” said Sayumi. “We should leave a little earlier than usual today. We can’t afford to linger longer than we’re supposed to and give the authorities an even worse impression of our club than they already have.”

She made a good point, and we started quickly packing up our stuff, cramming the notebooks and pencil cases we’d taken out for the meeting back into our bags. As I gathered up my things, I happened to glance across the conference table and notice a black notebook lying in its center. *That incredibly on-point shade of black… Isn’t that my* Bloody Bible*? Huh? I don’t remember taking that out of my bag today.*

“C’mon, Juu! Hurry up!”

“Whoops! Be right there!”

With no time to waste, I grabbed the *Bloody Bible*, stashed it in my bag, and jogged out of the room to join Hatoko. The others had already gone on ahead, and we rushed to catch up with them.

Man, though, I didn't think we'd spend all afternoon on this and not come up with any good solutions. In the end, it felt like our club activities had been as unproductive as ever. I was starting to feel a little down about it when Hatoko suddenly piped up.

"Hey, Juu!" she said, peering over at my face with a truly genuine smile. "Today was as fun as ever, wasn't it?"

"Yeah…it was," I agreed, smiling along with her in spite of myself.

Our club activities had been the same as always. It might've been pointless, but it wasn't a waste of time. Our meeting might've been in vain, but it wasn't meaningless. It was *our* club, *our* way of doing things. We needn't have bothered searching for a new club activity. We had one that was perfect for us already, and we should've stood strong and told that to anyone who had the guts to complain to us.

I won't let anyone tell me that our club's a waste of space. Not the president of the student council, not God, not even DIO!

Okay…on second thought, forget about DIO. He can say whatever he wants to.

Chapter 6: Reverse Crux Record

“Hmm.”

Later that night, I sat at my desk and racked my brain for answers. I’d returned home, had dinner with my parents and sister, taken a bath, then sat down to really think things through. What was I thinking about? It’s obvious, really.

“Maybe I should go with ‘stygian fires of purgatory’ instead of ‘stygian flames of purgatory’ after all…?”

Indeed, I was preoccupied with a problem no less daunting than the quest to prove Fermat’s Last Theorem. I had made up that “Stygian Flames of Purgatory” epithet back when I first thought up my power’s name, and at the time, I couldn’t imagine describing *Dark and Dark* in any other way. “Flame” just has a certain *something* to it that makes it several times cooler than plain old fire. Speaking as a (self-declared) disciple of the Flame Alchemist, I absolutely refuse to back down on that point.

But, well, it’d been half a year since then. People change over the course of half a year, and I wasn’t the same person I’d been back then. And so, being older and wiser, I found myself wondering if deliberately aiming for simplicity and going with “fire” instead might make the whole phrase cooler on the whole.

I’m sure if Tomoyo were here, she’d roast me with all her might and say that it doesn’t make a difference, but oh how wrong she would be! Naming something has a profound effect upon that something’s very being. In short, my choice of wording here—and power names on the whole, really—would play a major factor in determining the outcome of any supernatural battle! Probably!

“All right, only one thing to do at times like these! If I’m gonna workshop my power’s name, I ought to take it for a spin and get me some inspiration!” I stood up, held out my right arm, focused with all my might, and recited the new and improved (after a painful and extensive chaos-trimming process) Malediction of Unleashing!

“I am he who conquers chaos! O purgatorial—”

“Shaddup!”

Thud! I heard my sister smack the wall of her room, which was right next to mine.

“S-Sorry!” I shouted in reply.

“You’d better be! One more peep outta you tonight and you’re dead meat!”

My sister was a big fan of death threats, at least as far as I was concerned. I could practically feel her bloodlust seeping in through the wall between us, and it was intense enough to make me shrink away with fear.

Her name was Andou Machi, and she was in her first year of college. She was decent-looking, I guess, but she had the temperament of a battle-

hardened internet troll. Our parents picked her name because, surprise surprise, she was born in March. Part of me had to wonder what they were planning to do if one of us were born in January or February. Would we have ended up as Andou Januari and Andou Feburari? I wouldn't put it past them.

Anyway, the wall that separated our rooms was basically paper-thin, and if we did anything even slightly loud, the other party would hear it, no question, hence her habit of pounding on the wall the second she heard me start to get noisy. *I really wish she'd stop being such a pain in my neck.*

"You just thought that I'm a pain in the neck, didn't you?!" *Thud*!

"No, I didn't! Sorry!" What is she, a mind reader? Freaky.

The thud of terror, unfortunately, had totally knocked me out of the moment. I gave up on invoking my power and went back to mulling over its name instead. *Hmm... Yeah, I think it's gotta be "The Stygian Flame:* Dark and Dark*." Changing around the lead-in for no reason just doesn't feel right.*

Satisfied with the conclusion I'd reached, I strolled over to my desk. I had to keep up the front of being a perfectly ordinary high schooler, which meant that I was obligated to do my homework on a daily basis like the rest of my peers. The moment I opened up my bag, however, I realized that something was off. There were *two* black notebooks inside. I pulled them out to find that one of them was the *Bloody Bible*, while the other was—

"The Reverse Crux Record?!"

There was no doubt about it. The tome of the inverted cross, the treasonous manifesto disowned by God Himself that I'd witnessed a few days earlier, Kiryuu's jet-black cringe compilation—*ahem*, notebook, lay in my hand. *But how on earth did it end up in my bag?*

"Oh, I get it," I muttered to myself. "That notebook I grabbed on my way out of the club room wasn't the *Bloody Bible* after all. It was the *Reverse Crux Record*!"

But no, that still didn't explain anything. Even if that were the case, what had it been doing in the club room? It was hard to imagine that Kiryuu had snuck into the school for the sole purpose of leaving it there...

My mind was full of questions. Questions...and a hint of budding temptation. I wanted to look inside. I wanted to read Kiryuu's notebook.

"And, I mean, why wouldn't I? He's already read my *Bloody Bible*. Fair's fair, right?"

I lost to temptation almost instantly and resolved myself to give it a read. The moment before I opened the tome, though, I heard a voice resound from deep within my mind: *You sure about that?*

"Wh-Who's there?!" I wheeled about, searching for the source of the mysterious voice, but I was alone in the room. Still, it continued. *If you open the* Reverse Crux Record*, there'll be no turning back*, it cautioned. *Are you really ready for that?*

"H-Hey, seriously, wh-who are you?! C-Could it be? Is that you, *Dark and Dark*?! You've finally grown strong enough to talk with—"

Thud! A slam on the wall shut me right up. *Yikes*—when she pounded on the wall without a word, it was always a sure sign she was mere moments away from totally losing it. Pretending that a mysterious voice was talking with me was fun and all, but it'd have to wait for another time.

I took a deep breath, then looked back at the notebook. This time though, I didn't hesitate. I just opened it right up…then gulped.

"Oh. *Oh*."

The next morning, I left home a little earlier than usual. I didn't head for my classroom when I arrived at school, though, instead making a beeline straight to the club room.

There's no such thing as morning workouts in the literary club, obviously. Nevertheless, when I peeked in the window, I found exactly the girl I'd expected inside. She was pacing about frantically, searching for something. I cracked the door open and walked in.

"Hey."

"Gah!" The girl—Tomoyo—jumped as I greeted her. Then, she turned around so slowly and stiffly, she reminded me of a machine in desperate need of grease. "A-Andou… Wh-What're you doing here this early?"

"Not much. What about you?"

"O-Oh, same, not much…"

"I was gonna brew some tea. Want a cup?"

"Uhh, sure…"

We sat across from each other at the table and sipped our tea in silence. Eventually, when our cups were drained, I struck up a conversation as casually as if I were making the most idle of small talk.

"So, are you trying to become a light novelist?"

To cut right to the chase, the *Reverse Crux Record* I had accidentally brought home with me wasn't actually Kiryuu's after all. Technically, it wasn't even the *Reverse Crux Record* at all. It was the exact same style of notebook as his was, but it was, in fact, a completely different one. I hadn't actually read through his, of course, so this was all just conjecture, but I couldn't imagine the handwriting inside this one being his. It was distinctly feminine, in a way that just didn't suit him.

So whose notebook could it be? Out of all the girls I knew who frequented the literary club's room, who would be likely to have a notebook of the exact same design of Kiryuu's? The answer was obvious: it could only be Kanzaki Tomoyo's.

In retrospect, this would probably explain why she'd been so desperate to hide something on her computer from me that one day I caught her posing. She'd been writing in the club room, all on her own, and had gotten so wrapped up in her own story she'd gotten carried away and started posing in front of the mirror at just the right time for me to catch her in the act.

“Ah, ahh, ahhhhhhhhh!” Tomoyo stammered incoherently. Her face kept shifting in color from bright red to deathly pale, and her mouth was flapping like a goldfish. “Wh-What’re you talking about…?”

“This is yours, right?” I asked, pulling the notebook out of my bag. It wasn’t the *Reverse Crux Record*, but by that point, I had a pretty good idea of what it *was*. “You’ve been using it to jot down ideas for your stories, right?”

Tomoyo made a screeching sound so high-pitched I could barely even hear it, and an instant later, the notebook vanished from my hand. She’d used *Closed Clock* to snatch it, apparently. For a moment, I assumed that she’d fled the room while time was stopped, but just like last time, I soon found her curled up in a ball in the far corner of the club room. *Guess going into a fetal position’s how she deals with sudden crises. Girl has the survival instincts of an armadillo, I swear.*

“Wh-Why would you *read* it?!” she wailed. “Ever heard of a thing called *privacy*, jackass?! Drop dead!”

“I didn’t exactly do it on purpose! I was positive it was Kiryuu’s! I mean, who could’ve imagined there were two *Reverse Crux Record*s out there?”

“I-It’s not one of *those*… Hajime spent ages trying to color a notebook just the right shade of black, and he left all the ones that weren’t good enough for him lying around the house. It’d be a waste not to use them, that’s all…” Her voice shook as she explained herself. Her entire body was trembling with shame, for that matter. Not that I could see much other than her back, with the way she was curled up.

I really did feel her, honestly. Tomoyo’s notebook was full of character profiles, worldbuilding notes, concepts, plot outlines—all the material she could possibly think of to base a novel on. It wasn’t a proper draft of a full-on novel in and of itself, but it was still unmistakably an original creative work of Kanzaki Tomoyo. And having your art get seen by other people just might be the most lethally embarrassing experience in the world.

When Kiryuu saw my *Bloody Bible*, I’d felt so embarrassed I wished I’d drop dead too. He had turned out to be one of my people in the end, which mitigated the damage a lot, but I still would’ve preferred it if he hadn’t seen it at all. And remember, this is *me* we’re talking about. I’m almost totally shameless, and even *I* had felt so ashamed I could have just curled up and died! The sheer depths of Tomoyo’s shame in that moment were, frankly, unfathomable.

As such, I decided that my only recourse was to offer a sincere apology. “So, uhh, sorry.”

“Are you k-kidding me…? Ugggh, this is the *worst*… Why *you*, of all people…?”

“Hey, I said I was sorry.”

“I-I’m not, like, *seriously* trying to be a writer, for the record! I was just, you know, writing some random stuff to kill time, that’s all!”

“Yeah, I’m not buying it.” I had to contradict her on that point. I didn’t know for sure if she was serious about becoming a light novelist or not, but I knew with absolute confidence that her writing was anything but “random” or for the sake of “killing time.”

“Wh-What do *you* know?!” Tomoyo snapped furiously.

“I know that you noted down the deadline for an amateur writing contest, that’s what!” I declared. Tomoyo gasped. “You wrote a list of artists you’d want to do the illustrations too.” She made a strained and horrified little squeal that time.

That had been the biggest tip-off that had made me realize she wanted to write light novels specifically. That, and the fact that she had all the girls on her character profile pages listed as “Heroine 1,” “Heroine 2,” and so on. Regular novels don’t operate under the assumption that a female character is a heroine by default.

“Look, you even practiced signing your pen name!”

“Oh my *God*, just kill me already!” Tomoyo leapt to her feet, grabbed me by the lapels, and shook me as hard as she could. Her whole face was flushed bright red, and she was definitely starting to tear up a little. “Why’re you so *calm* about this, anyway?! That just makes it worse! If you’re gonna laugh, then *laugh* already, dammit!”

“Huh?” I cocked my head in confusion. “Why would I laugh? What’s the joke?”

Tomoyo gaped at me. “Wha…? B-But, writing light novels is, like…weird, right? It’s embarrassing, right?”

“What’s embarrassing about light novels?” I asked, in spite of the fact that I understood why she’d feel that way and why she’d want to hide her ambition all too clearly. Writing a novel isn’t an ordinary thing to do. It’s not the sort of activity that most everyone has at least a little experience with, like baseball or soccer. That’s what makes it so embarrassing to throw yourself into, and that’s why you could never know for sure if the person you’re talking to would approve of it.

“B-But…I haven’t even debuted, and I was already practicing my signature and stuff. Isn’t that, like, super cringey?”

“Is it? News to me. For your information, I practice my signature practically every day!” *And I’m not even trying to be a writer! I do it in both Japanese* and *English characters too!*

“Right,” Tomoyo sighed. “For a second, I forgot I was talking with *you*.” Which was super obvious, of course, but somehow, the way she said it made me feel like she was making fun of me. Weird.

“And besides,” I added, “you realize this is the literary club, right? What’s so wrong with a literary club member writing a novel? We *all* wrote short stories for last year’s magazine, and we did all those story relays too!”

“Yeah, but none of you guys are really seriously trying to be writers, are you?”

“Well, no, but still…” I couldn’t deny it. I’d never gone all-out writing a story, long or short, with the serious intent of submitting it to a contest. Most likely, the same was true of Hatoko and Sayumi.

I assumed all the way through middle school that the people who join literature clubs must all want to be writers in the future, but when I actually joined one myself, I quickly corrected that bit of personal bias. Turns out that liking books doesn’t automatically make you want to write after all.

That’s not a universal rule, though. Some people who join literary clubs really *do* want to be writers. Like, for instance, a certain girl who was sitting before me, ready to break down in tears at any second.

“But anyway, come *on*, you can’t go getting embarrassed about writing a book! If *that’s* embarrassing, then what’s it say about me, the guy who scribes the hidden truth of this world in the *Bloody Bible* day in and day out?”

“Umm… Nothing that isn’t true? You really *are* embarrassing enough to make a girl cringe herself half to death.”

Wow, ouch! You’re gonna make me burst into tears, jerkface!

Tomoyo sighed. “Y’know what, I don’t even care anymore. Talking with you made me forget what I was even embarrassed about in the first place. I guess it’s just human nature to feel reassured when you see someone who’s even worse off than you are.”

Tomoyo was back on her feet and back on the offensive. Her attitude had done such a complete one-eighty it was almost hard to believe she’d been shivering like a terrified rodent mere moments before. Getting talked down to like that was irritating, of course, but I decided to let it go. It didn’t feel like the right time to get offended.

“Yeah, it’s true,” she declared. “I’m trying to become a writer. Actually…that’s not quite right. It’s not that I want to be a writer so much as that I want to get a book published. I want as many people to read my stories as possible, and I want to hear what they think of them…”

The more she spoke, the fainter her voice grew. I could understand what she meant painfully well, though. I’d thought about how great it’d be to be a writer or a manga artist plenty of times, myself.

I’ve imitated the art from my favorite manga and written fanfics of my favorite light novels. I’ve imagined what Devil Fruit I’d eat, what sort of Zanpakuto I’d wield, what Stand I’d awaken to, and what Nen ability I’d possess. I’ve dreamed up more fantasies than I can count, and I’ve wished my fantasies could be a reality almost as many times. Considering all that, how could I possibly make light of Tomoyo’s feelings?

“I know that going pro’s not gonna be easy, and I don’t think I’m super talented or anything,” she explained, “but I’ve been having so much fun writing lately…”

“Yeah, I get you,” I replied. “So, what’s the problem? If writing’s fun, then go ahead and write.” I didn’t think that enjoying writing was enough to make somebody a pro, to be sure, but on the other hand, I had a hard time

imagining that someone who *didn't* like writing would ever get all that good at it, talented or not.

"So, what? Are you gonna cheer me on?" she asked, a glint of hope in her eyes as she watched carefully for my reaction.

I thought about it for a moment before I replied. "Nah, I don't think so."

"Huh…?" Tomoyo looked so shocked you'd think I literally stabbed her in the back, but I wasn't done yet.

"How to put it… I think that it's not a great idea to throw yourself into supporting people for this sort of thing that easily. Like, if a friend of yours wants to be a writer, or a manga artist, or a musician, or a comedian, or whatever, that means they'll be trying to break into a pretty risky business. There's no stability in careers like those."

It's easy to cheer a friend on. "You've got this," you can shout. "I know you can pull it off!" But of course it's easy—you, the person doing the cheering, aren't taking on any of the risks or responsibilities that your friend will have to shoulder. It takes barely any effort, and it makes your friend feel good about themself, so it's a win-win.

And yet, I still saw things differently.

"Anybody can cheer you on when you're chasing your dreams…but it takes someone who's *really* close to you to worry about you instead." That's something that only your family, your loved ones, and your friends can do, in my book. "If you were the sort of person who goes around bragging to everyone about how you're aiming to be a writer, then I'd cheer you on without a second thought. But that's not you, is it?"

She sat there silently, not answering, so I continued. "At this point, I have no idea how serious about this you actually are. If writing light novels is fun for you, and that's all there is to it, then hey, that's fine! But if you really want to be a writer—if you really want to be a pro—then I can't just cheer you on that irresponsibly. After all, we're friends, aren't we?"

Tomoyo had been staring at the floor the entire time I was talking, and even after I'd finished, she stayed silent for a moment, fidgeting her fingers restlessly. Finally, she managed to let out a quiet "Why?"

"Why…? Why do you always act like such a…such a big, stupid, goofball *moron*…but then at times like these, and *only* times like these, you actually start making sense…?"

"Oh, shut it. I always make sense." We fell back into awkward silence. I'll admit it: some of the stuff I'd just said might've been pretty darn corny. I had to push through it and salvage the mood, though, so I started talking again, trying to sound as bright and chipper as I could. "Oh, but if you ever want somebody to read your work, I'd be up for it!"

"Hell no." An instant reply. She didn't even have to think about it; the answer must've come out by pure reflex.

Uh, wow? Mean? Isn't this the part where you're supposed to blush, nod, and say "Okay…" all shy-like? Read the mood, girl! Or at least read the script!

“You’re the last person on Earth I’d *ever* let read my stuff.”

“Th-The *last* person…? Oh, wait. Is this ’cause of the most recent story you wrote about in there?”

Tomoyo’s expression stiffened up once again. The very last plot outline in her notebook had been for a classic supernatural battle story. She’d only roughed out a broad outline, so far, but it basically boiled down to the tale of a protagonist who wielded dark flames and a heroine with the power to control time.

I didn’t even have to think about it—she’d obviously modeled the duo on me and herself. The story clearly drew a ton of inspiration from how we and our clubmates had awakened to our powers. And, well…she’d written a bunch of notes about scenes where the me-like protagonist and the her-like heroine flirt around, or where he trips and somehow ends up grabbing her chest, or where he decides to walk into the bathroom without knocking for who knows what reason and she’s already inside…

“N-N-No, it’s not…that’s not…no!” Tomoyo waved her hands frantically in the air, her face bright red. “I-I don’t, like, feel like *that* about you at all, I was just—”

“Yeah, duh. Don’t worry, I wouldn’t make that sorta stupid misunderstanding.”

“—writing down whatever came to mind, and it sorta just…wait, what?”

“Writers and their stories are two totally different things,” I declared, drawing an important line in the sand. Assuming that everything an author writes reflects their desires and personality perfectly is one of the most foolish acts a person could possibly commit.

Like, you can’t assume that mystery authors are all latent serial killers. You can’t assume that people who write racy books about little girls are actually pedophiles, and you can’t assume that people who write harem light novels are all lifelong virgins, and you can’t assume that people who write supernatural battle stories all have genuine cases of chuunibyou. Holding that sort of prejudice just proves that you’re lacking in love for fiction on the whole!

Authors don’t *just* write about their own desires, so even if Tomoyo had written a story about a guy modeled after me getting all flirty-wirty with a girl modeled after her, I wasn’t about to read anything into it. The fact that I didn’t misunderstand her was, for the record, hella cool of me.

“I bet that having them end up like that was just convenient for the sake of the story, right?” I guessed.

“Huh…? Ah, y-yeah! Right, exactly!” Tomoyo stammered out a hurried agreement, then heaved a long, deep sigh. “Andou…don’t tell anyone about this, okay?”

“Yeah, I know. I won’t. But why not tell the other literary club members, at least? I don’t think any of them would make fun of you for it.”

“You’re right, but…I dunno, it’s just awkward! Besides, I think it’d be better to tell everyone once I actually have some results I can show them…”

She wants results first? That's just like her—she's never been the type to let other people see her struggles. "Results, huh? Now that you mention it, how've you done so far? Submitted anything to any contests?"

I'd asked it casually, but Tomoyo immediately snapped her gaze away from me. *H-Huh? Did I say something I shouldn't have?*

"I've…gotten dropped in the first round twice."

I didn't know what to say to that. Most light novel contests for new writers are structured into multiple rounds of judging. Three rounds or so's pretty typical. I was sort of familiar with the process since I'd read so many of them, and I knew enough to be aware that getting dropped in the first round is as bad of a result as you could possibly get.

Yeaaah, okay, that explains a lot. No wonder she doesn't want to bring it up. I wasn't about to say it out loud, but frankly, none of the ideas in her notebook had been all that interesting. I guess the best way to put it would be that you could tell she was writing from a girl's perspective in a male-dominated market? Sorta like how Aoki Ko couldn't bring herself to draw panty shots in *Bakuman*, even though she knew her male fans would eat them up.

As I struggled to find the right words, Tomoyo's gaze dropped to the floor. "Things never work out that easily, do they?" she quipped in an offhanded tone. Then, a second later, a pyramid of books had suddenly been erected on the table. I knew what things moving around the room in an instant meant: *Closed Clock*.

"I can stop time," Tomoyo grumbled. "I've got one of the craziest superpowers I can think of, but here I am, totally incapable of writing a half-decent book." She tapped the pyramid, which collapsed, the books scattering all across the table. Tomoyo was smiling, but that smile was tinged with a hint of self-derision.

"My power doesn't do me any good when it comes to getting along with my family, and it sure as hell isn't helping me realize my dreams either. I actually used to wish that I could stop time, y'know? But now that I can actually do it, I've realized that it's surprisingly pointless."

"Mmm…"

"I can stop time and shout '*WRYYYYYYYYYYY!*' all I want, but since time's, y'know, *stopped*, nobody ever even reacts. It's just boring."

"Hold up. You actually do that?"

"Gah! Th-That was just an example!"

Oh, wow, she's totally actually done it. I'm talking with a girl who plays DIO when nobody else can see her. This is a real pot calling the kettle black situation, I know, but still: oof.

"A-Anyway, the point is that my power's totally useless!"

"Useless, eh…?" I pondered her words for a moment, then turned them back around on her. "So, what *do* you want? You want a power that helps you get along with your family? Or a power that lets you write the best book ever?"

“Hah! You’re kidding, right?” Tomoyo scoffed at my question. “That’d make the whole thing totally pointless!”

I silently nodded. She was exactly right. It wouldn’t be an accomplishment if you let your power do the work for you. It’d be pointless.

“Hey, Tomoyo?” I said. “Watch this.” I stood up, spread my legs to a shoulder-width stance, and held my right arm aloft.

“I am he who conquers chaos! O purgatorial flame that sways upon the brink of the Abyss, O twisted blaze of sable darkness, blighted crimson of deepest night! O howling, maddening inferno that paves the road to oblivion! Fetter sin with sin, pierce my being with thine onyx sigil, and bare thine fangs at the arrogance of providence!”

My incantation—the new version of the Malediction of Unleashing—was complete. With one final shout, I activated my ability.

“Dark and Dark!”

Pitch-black flames flared up from my right hand. That didn’t seem quite good enough, though, so I went a step further, extending my power across my body. I cloaked myself in an aura of fire, taking care to go a little heavy on the flames around my shoulders. I made myself look as cool as I could possibly be. I made myself look as cool as *anyone* could possibly be.

“Well? What do you think, Tomoyo—nay, *Closed Clock*?”

“Huh…? What do I think about *what*?”

“Hella cool, isn’t it?” I grinned. “Supernatural powers are the coolest thing ever—and that’s *all* they are. That’s all they have to be.”

Powers like ours could never be allowed to bring misfortune upon others, even accidentally. But they couldn’t bring fortune either. They just had to be cool. Nothing more, nothing less.

Tomoyo let out her longest, most exaggerated sigh yet, then cracked a smile.

“Go off, chuuni-boy.”

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After school, the usual crowd gathered together in the club room.

“Want some cookies, Chifuyu? We baked them in home ec today!”

“Okay.”

“Hey, Sayumi, think you could help me out for a sec? I’m having trouble with this problem.”

“Oh, I see. To start with, x refers to the area of this triangle—that’s what you’ll have to calculate first. Here, you do it like this...”

The state of things in our room couldn’t have been any more mundane. It was a scene you could’ve found in absolutely any high school in the country, played out by a group of absolutely ordinary high schoolers.

“Oh, and these cookies are even better with a little chocolate melted on them! Here, I’ll make some fire.”

“I wanna try them with cinnamon too. I think we have some in the fridge at home, so I’ll use a Gate and go get it. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, right, Sayumi? While I’m at it, I spilled a drink on my skirt earlier. Think you could handle that for me?”

“Certainly. I’ll undo that right away.”

Okay, maybe not *absolutely* ordinary. It was a perfectly representative slice of *our* everyday lives, though, at the very least.

Half a year ago, we had awakened to supernatural powers out of nowhere. We’d expected our daily lives to be altered beyond all recognition as a result...but we’d been wrong. Completely, utterly wrong. Our daily lives, as it turned out, were a lot harder to upend than we’d anticipated.

“Mwa ha ha,” I chuckled as I gazed out over the so-called everyday scene before me. “A day will come for us to be thrown into battle. It’s inevitable. But until that day arrives, I can think of worse ways than this to gather our strength and heal our wounds.”

“I’ve definitely never seen you use any of this ‘strength’ you’ve supposedly been gathering,” jabbed Tomoyo offhandedly.

Just then, the door opened, and a girl stepped inside. Her gaze was sharp, and her mouth was fixed in a perfectly measured scowl. She stood there, head held high and posture perfect, sweeping her sharp glare across the room.

“Pardon the intrusion,” she politely but gruffly opened. “This is the literary club, correct?”

“If it isn’t Miss Kudou,” replied Sayumi. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

That answered one question right off the bat: our visitor was Kudou Mirei, the president of the student council. She wore her uniform precisely according to school regulations, not a fold out of place or a wrinkle to be seen. Everything about her, in fact, from her expression to the atmosphere around her, felt clear-cut and to the point. She was all around quite attractive, but you could just *tell* how intensely by the book and high-strung she was just by looking at her.

“I’ve come here today to audit your club,” declared Kudou.

“To ‘audit’ us?” questioned Sayumi.

“Quite. As we’ve discussed multiple times, *President* Takanashi, I have my doubts about the merits of allowing your club to remain on the books. This school’s budget and facilities are stretched thin as is, and we can’t afford to waste them on a club with very few members and virtually nothing in the way of productive activities.”

“I understand your position,” replied Sayumi, “but allow me to remind you that the literary club has been around since our school was founded. We’re a longstanding institution in this school’s history. Don’t you think it would be rash to do away with a club such as ours for frivolous reasons like those?”

“The old student council and the teachers might’ve let you fast-talk your way out of this,” scoffed Kudou, “but not me. I don’t care how much history a club has or how much of an institution it is. On my watch, useless clubs get axed.”

If there were a blunter way for Kudou to make her case, I sure couldn’t think of it, and judging by Sayumi’s grimace, she was on the same page as me. The bigger problem, though, was that Kudou was right. If you asked me what our club was contributing to the school on the whole, I’d struggle to come up with an answer. Doing nothing was our modus operandi, after all.

Of course, that wasn’t to say I was planning on going down without a fight. Glancing around at my clubmates, I could tell from the look in their eyes that they felt the same way.

“Mwa ha ha!” I laughed in my signature style. So, this is war, then? A battle between us and the student council, with the fate of our club on the line? Really, now—yet another problem that our powers won’t be of any help for whatsoever. “Why not be honest with us, little miss president? You’re not here to audit us—you’re here to scout us out!”

That’s right! Whether we’re confronted with boring, mundane issues or actual, supernatural battle-style disasters, I’ll take them on in my own way! I choose to forge my own path as Guiltia Sin Jurai and live the coolest life I possibly can!

“I saw through your true identity ages ago,” I boasted. “How long are you planning to keep up this farce? Just admit it: you couldn’t care less about whether or not our club’s disbanded! That was all just a pretext for you to make contact with us, wasn’t it?!”

Kudou shot a glare of pure animosity in my direction, and holy *crap* did it ever freak me out, but I wasn’t finished with my speech yet, and I had no intention of stopping. “Oh, believe me, I understand your apprehensions. Anyone would fear the consequences of antagonizing a faction as mighty as ours. But be that as it may, I can’t *stand* dragging these things out! It’s time for you to cut to the chase, reveal your true intentions, and get to the good —”

“*Can* it, chuuni!”

Tomoyo smacked me right on the head as hard as she could. Hatoko was muttering something along the lines of “Please, Juu, this isn’t the time…” and Chifuyu was looking at me like I was some sort of strange, unidentifiable cryptid.

“Excuse us, Miss Kudou,” said Sayumi, sounding for all the world like a corporate middle manager apologizing to her boss for one of her subordinate’s mistakes. “I’m afraid that one of our members suffers from a serious psychological illness. Please ignore him.”

Not gonna let this get me down! No way, no how! Cringe it up all you want! I’ll walk the path that I think’s coolest, no matter what you people say! I’ll live on in this seemingly fragile yet profoundly unbreakable world of the everyday—this world that, deep down, I don’t even want to see broken—and I’ll bear the sin that is to be a chuuni on my back all the while! After all, nothing’s cooler than being hella sinful!

“How…?”

For a minute, I was totally sure that was the perfect line to close the story on, but then a single word slipped from Kudou’s lips. Her voice was quavering, and it was easy to assume that was on account of my behavior pissing her off. I’d actually forgotten she was still there for a second…not that there was anywhere else she could’ve been. You can’t blame me, though! I was in end-of-the-volume mode, and she wasn’t the first thing on my mind!

Tomoyo, who seemed wary of the president’s rapidly simmering rage as well, leaned over to whisper in my ear. “Hey, Andou, this is seriously bad! Look at her; she’s gonna snap at any second! Hurry up and apologize!”

“Hmph. Very well. I’ll admit it: I shouldn’t have called you ‘little miss president.’ You *are* my senior, and I should have called you ‘Madam President’ instead.”

“*Not* the problem!” snapped Tomoyo. Kudou, meanwhile, turned her glare onto me.

“How? Andou Jurai…” Her eyes burned with indignation…and a glimmer of distress. It was easy enough to understand why she’d be enraged, but I couldn’t even begin to guess why she’d look shaken. *Frightened*, even. I didn’t have long to ponder that mystery, though, because a moment later she resolved it for me.

“How did you figure out my true identity?”

“…’Scuse me?”

We were all completely flabbergasted.

“Don’t play dumb!” Kudou snapped. “Everything you said…it’s all true—every word of it! I’ve been monitoring you this whole time. All that stuff about disbanding the literary club *was* just a pretext. I *was* putting on a front just for the sake of investigating you!”

My train of thought ground to a screeching halt. I couldn't even begin to make heads or tails of the situation I was in. *Wait, wait, wait. What the hell is she talking about? Is she playing along for a laugh, or—no, surely not. She couldn't* actually *mean...*

"That's right! I've been monitoring you this whole time...ever since the day I learned about your powers!"

Every member of the literary club shivered in unison. She *knew*. Somehow, Kudou had found out about our abilities. As for *how* she knew, I quickly jumped to one simple conclusion.

"Do you have powers too, Kudou?!"

"Hmph! Quit with the feigned surprise, Andou Jurai. You just told me you'd seen through my true identity, didn't you? In other words, you saw through the fact that I have my own supernatural power! Isn't that right?"

"Y-Yeah... R-R-Right, totally!"

"I see now that I may have ever so slightly underestimated you. I'm seeing you in a new light. But tell me, how *did* you figure me out? I'm all but certain that the act I put on was flawless, so how did you see through it?"

"I, err... I mean... Uhh..."

"You have no intention of revealing your secrets, do you? Fair enough. I *am* your enemy, so of course you wouldn't."

For an enemy, she was awfully willing to read the most generous explanations possible into everything I said and did. She was saving me a hell of a lot of face, but it wasn't the time to be worried about embarrassing myself, regardless. I had to figure out what on earth I was supposed to say to her, first of all.

What do you even say about a situation like this? That I got hit by a bolt from the blue? That I shot for the moon and landed in a whole different galaxy? Actually, wait—I know exactly what I should say about these circumstances before anything else.

What sorta asspull plot twist was that?! LMAO!

Seriously, what the hell? A full half year passes since our powers had awakened with no notable events whatsoever, and then a self-proclaimed 'enemy' suddenly pops up out of absolutely nowhere? And it was the president of the student council, of all people! *She* had powers too?!

"I...suppose this means that Andou dug himself so deep into a hole of chuuni idiocy, he somehow managed to strike gold?" said Sayumi, the color draining from her face as she slowly backed away from Kudou. Tomoyo, Hatoko, Chifuyu, and I all jumped up from our places at the table and backed away as well, taking up a position across the room from her.

Actually, on second thought, saying we "took up a position" would be giving us too much credit. It wasn't anything that cool. We were retreating out of sheer terror, that's all. The situation was so far-flung from reality, none of us had any idea what to do.

"C-Calm down, everyone! Follow my lead!" I stammered, doing my best to set my clubmates—and, while I was at it, myself—at ease. "Don't worry! I

know how these things go! I've read tons of *Jump* manga that suddenly turn into battle stories right before they get canceled!"

"Why the *hell* would that make us worry *less*?!" shouted Tomoyo.

"Light novels too! I've read tons of 'em that seem like rom-coms for the first half or so, but then they suddenly force in a bunch of battle-based plot twists toward the end!"

"Again, what's your point?!"

"Not to mention mystery series that start out totally realistic but go full-blown supernatural battle in the endgame for no real reason!"

"Are you even *listening* to yourself?!"

Tomoyo's comebacks were less on-point than usual, possibly on account of how nervous she was, but thankfully, that little back-and-forth did a pretty good job of clearing my head.

"Okay then, Kudou—ah, I mean, *Kudou Mirei*," I said, quickly switching back to max-drama mode. It just seemed right to go with that persona, at least for the moment. "What is it you're after?"

"You really think I'd tell you that?"

"Hmm... In that case, let me ask you this: what do you know about our powers?" Could she know why we awakened to them? Could she know why we were the ones to awaken to them?

"Sure, I'll answer that one…*if* you can beat me, that is!" Kudou declared with a fearless smirk.

"*Beat* you…?" I repeated, aghast.

"Don't worry," she quickly added, "I'm not saying I want a fight to the death. I just want to get a look at your powers, that's all! Though I suppose you should prepare yourselves to break a bone or two in the process."

Kudou took a step forward, and all of us took a simultaneous step back.

"Wh-What should we do, Andou?" Tomoyo whispered into my ear. "Should I use *Closed Clock* and blitz her, or what…?"

Her tone sounded confident enough, but I could tell how worried she was underneath that front by the look in her eyes. She was certainly quicker than any of the rest of us. Really, when *Closed Clock* entered the picture, speed lost all meaning as a concept.

There was just one problem: none of us, Tomoyo included, had any real combat experience. All the god-tier powers in the world wouldn't change the fact that not a single one of us had ever used our abilities to deliberately harm another human being. We had power to spare, but on a psychological level, we were completely toothless.

"Andou…?" said Sayumi, Hatoko, and Chifuyu, all turning to me as well. They all had the same look in their eyes. It spoke of a mixture of worry, restlessness…and a hint of resolve. I could tell that, should worse come to worst, they were all prepared to take action on their own. There wasn't a single heroine in the room who was hoping to sit back and let herself be protected.

How could I possibly let myself back down in the face of all that resolve? “I’ll do it,” I said, stepping out ahead of them.

“A-Are you *kidding* me?! What’re you thinking, Andou?!”

“She’s right, Juu! You don’t stand a chance!”

Tomoyo and Hatoko frantically urged me back, but I took another step forward instead. *Dark and Dark* only had one function: to look cool. I had no idea what sort of power Kudou could have, but nevertheless, it was plain as day that I had no chance of beating her. That didn’t stop me, though. I walked on, a vanguard of one.

“Don’t worry, guys. If things go bad, my dark side will lend me its power,” I reassured them. I was half kidding, but also half serious. We were in big trouble, no doubt about it, and yet on some level, I was enjoying the situation.

I was feeling the same ebullient sense of excitement I’d felt on the day our powers awakened. The situation was utterly disconnected from reality, *exactly* the sort of supernatural battle-style plot twist I’d been longing for, and I could feel a seed of delight—or, at least, something resembling it—begin to sprout deep down inside me.

I mean, between Kudou’s reassurance that she wasn’t planning on fighting to the death and Sayumi’s *Route of Origin*, I figured I’d *probably* be fine, even if I did get maimed a little. With an option like Sayumi’s power to fall back on in the worst-case scenario, I felt like there was no reason not to enjoy the moment in my own sort of way.

“Mwa ha ha! No need for backup. I can handle the likes of *you* on my own! You wish to behold the accursed power some call the Knock on Hell’s Door? Then so be it!” I slowly unbuttoned my uniform’s jacket as I spoke, making sure to drop the new title I’d thought up the night before into my speech. “Tell me. Do you know why I always wear this jacket to school, day after day?”

“Because not wearing it violates school regulations?” Kudou guessed blandly. *I mean, yes, but also no!*

“Mwa ha ha! No, it’s not for the sake of regulations—it’s for the sake of *restraints*! My power is so mighty and violent that not even I can control it, and this jacket serves as its seal! It has innumerable magical runes of all types inscribed within it, and it weighs no less than a hundred kilograms!”

I swept my jacket off my shoulders and cast it dramatically aside. It fluttered gently through the air, only to be intercepted by Hatoko, who clearly didn’t realize this was not the moment to butt in and be helpful.

“Whoops! Almost missed it!”

“Hatokooo! Come on, you can’t just *catch* it like that!”

“Wh-Why not?!”

“’Cause it’s supposed to be crazy heavy, stupid! It totally breaks continuity if you’re carrying it around like it’s nothing!”

“Oh, right! I get it!” said Hatoko, finally on the same page as me. “O-Oh nooo, it’s sooo heavy! I can’t believe Juu’s been wearing something that

weighs so much this whooole time! He's incredible!" she said, utterly failing to sell the part in any capacity.

Yeah, great. Ham it up, why don't you? I clicked my tongue at her internally, then forced myself to get back on track and thrust my right arm out before me. Tomoyo's eyes widened; she knew my mannerisms well, and she could tell exactly what I was about to do.

"Oh, you *dumbass*, you *cannot* be serious! Are you really planning on reciting the Malediction of Unleashing *now*, of all times?!"

"Don't be so quick to judge, Tomoyo," said Sayumi. "Andou's Malediction isn't necessarily as meaningless of a gesture as you seem to think it is."

"Huh...? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I believe it's possible that to Andou, the Malediction of Unleashing serves the same sort of purpose as an athlete's pre-shot routine."

"A pre-shot routine...? You mean, like, the little tics the pros have? Like how some baseball players re-roll their sleeves every time they get up to bat, or how some tennis players always bounce the ball a couple times before they hit a serve?"

"Exactly. They serve as a sort of ritual for the players. By performing a certain action consciously and deliberately, they ensure that they never let their play become too rote or mechanical and focus themselves to an intense degree of concentration. It could very well be that by reciting the Malediction, Andou is putting himself into a state of mind that's fully and perfectly focused upon the use of his ability."

"Okay, sure, but no matter how focused he is, his ability's...well, you know..."

"Nevertheless, let's believe in him. It's not like we have a complete understanding of even our own abilities. For all we know, there may be something more to his that we simply haven't grasped yet. Andou has confronted his power with more sincerity and dedication than any of us, and I believe we should stake our hopes on him."

"It's okay, Tomoyo," a small voice added.

"Chifuyu..." said Tomoyo, glancing down at the little girl.

"At times like these, Andou has what it takes."

"Andou..."

I could feel their gazes on my back. Their feelings—their passion—gave me the power I needed. I paused, took a deep breath, and began to recite the cursed incantation that would unleash my power onto this world!

"I am he who congers—concwers—congwews—!"

A deafening silence descended, muffling the world in its awkward embrace.

Oh god. I flubbed it. When the cards were down and push came to shove, I totally flubbed it. Oooh, god, grant me the sweet mercy of death!

Seriously, what do I do about this? It's like time's literally stopped in here! Since when was I able to use Closed Clock*?* Speaking of Tomoyo, I felt an incredibly intense stare burning a hole in my back. I could almost hear her voice in my mind, telling me that she was an idiot for believing in me for even a second.

In front of me, meanwhile, Kudou was clearly struggling to come up with an appropriate reaction. The look in her eyes just *screamed* "What on earth is this guy trying to do, here?" I suddenly had a new appreciation for the phrase "between a rock and a hard place."

"Screw it! Malediction canceled! *Dark and Dark*!"

In the face of overpowering shame so intense I wanted to drop dead on the spot, I decided to cut to the chase, bring out my power, and gloss over the whole debacle I'd just inflicted upon myself. My pre-shot routine was in shambles. This would be the single sloppiest invocation of *Dark and Dark* I'd ever executed, but sloppy or not, the usual transcendentally awesome jet-black flame erupted from my hand.

"So that's your power, Andou?" asked Kudou.

"That's right! Born from the umbral depths of chaos incarnate and mighty enough to burn the very gods to ash: the stygian fires of Hell itself!" I declared triumphantly, raising my flame-adorned hand overhead. "Now—let us begin the end of the beginning!"

I decided that was the perfect moment to bust out the ridiculously deep and profoundly meaningful catchphrase I'd come up with for myself. Kudou's eyes narrowed as she inspected my power…then *smiled*.

"There it is! You've shown me your power!"

"Wha—?!" A sudden, overwhelming sense of lethargy swept over me, and I fell to my knees. The sable flame atop my palm wavered. I was losing control of *Dark and Dark*. No, not losing it—it was being *stolen* from me!

"And now," declared Kudou, "your power is mine!" With that, *Dark and Dark's* flame left my hand entirely, leaping directly over to hers instead.

"*D-Dark and Dark*! *Dark and Dark*!" I desperately shouted, but my call was in vain. However much I screamed, I was unable to invoke my power. "K-Kudou Mirei! You *didn't*!"

"Oh, but I did. My power allows me to steal the powers of others!"

I recoiled with shock and horror, but it wasn't long before I realized how much sense that really made. I'd been careless. She'd gone out of her way to tell us that she wanted to get a look at our powers, and she'd just stood there passively during our extended, insufferable back-and-forth banter session. She hadn't made the slightest move to attack us herself. Every action she had taken was for the sake of tricking me into using my power.

"*Dark and Dark*…" I crumbled, lying prone on the floor. I could intuitively sense the truth behind her words. *Dark and Dark* had vanished

from within me, leaving only a gaping void in its place. It was gone. *Dark and Dark* was gone, and nothing I could do would bring it back.

"It's been by my side for the past half year, supporting me through good times and bad... *Dark and Dark...*" I lamented my loss. The grief that was tormenting me was no less potent than that of an elderly retiree lamenting the passing of their spouse. "It was always there to listen to me... Every morning when I woke up, I'd say 'Good morning, *Dark and Dark*,' and every night before bed, I'd say 'Sleep tight, *Dark and Dark*'..."

"Wait, like, for real?! Holy *crap*, that's creepy!"

I was so focused on my unfolding personal tragedy that I didn't even hear Tomoyo's jab. "Take my leg! Or my arm! Take both of them! You can even have my heart...just give it back! It's the only superpower I have!"

"I *know* you're quoting Ed when he transmutes Al's soul! Stop it!"

But Kudou didn't react to my spirit-rending wails or Tomoyo's nitpicking. She was too busy inspecting my power. "Hmm. So this is Andou Jurai's ability...?" she muttered to herself, manifesting the black flame in her hand and peering inquisitively at it.

Oh, gods... My very own Dark and Dark *is getting used by somebody else.* "Right in front of me... Some random new character just NTR'd *Dark and Dark*, right before my eyes..."

"Pretty sure that's *not* the right word for this situation!"

"God *dammit*, *Dark and Dark*, were you just playing around with me this whole time?! Toying with my poor, innocent heart?! Are you okay with *anyone* using you?! *Dark and Dark*, you slut! *Harlot*!"

"Your anger is seriously misdirected!"

"But...I gotta admit...it *does* feel kinda nice, in a really messed up sorta way... This is the most tragic thing that's ever happened to me, but it's also sorta exciting!"

"This is *not* the time to awaken to a cuckoldry fetish!"

"Ugggh..." The shame and disgrace were so overpowering, I couldn't even stand. How could I have made this grave of a mistake? I went in for an all-out suicide attack, and all I managed to accomplish with it was getting my power stolen by the enemy.

"So, it makes black fire? That's it? What an incredibly useless ability," mused Kudou, already sounding bored with it. It seemed that she was granted an innate understanding of the traits of the powers she stole.

"I was hoping it would have some secret effect that wasn't immediately apparent, but no, against all odds, it really *is* an utterly powerless superpower... Not that it matters, really." Kudou turned her pointed glare behind me, toward the other members of the literary club. "I was after all of *your* powers to begin with."

I was speechless. Confronted with the power to steal other powers, I was stricken by how terrifying such an ability really was. I finally understood: she'd come here to make all of my friends' god-tier abilities her own.

“I probably don’t need to explain this to you,” noted Kudou, “but there’s no limit to the number of powers I can steal. I can keep Andou Jurai’s power and take all of yours at the same time without issue.”

That declaration snuffed out the last spark of hope I had left. If she’d only been able to steal one power at a time, then we probably would’ve been able to manage, one way or another, but if she claimed all five of our abilities, she’d turn into a monster beyond all imagination—a monster capable of bringing the entire world to its knees.

“All right,” she said, spreading her arms wide open. “Come at me! All of you at once!”

There was nothing I could do. Staying on the ground and clenching my teeth was the best I had to offer. My clubmates’ unparalleled powers would be turned against us. The stronger we were, the stronger our foe would become. *Dammit... It’s hopeless. We’ve lost.*

But then, somebody walked past me.

“Tomoyo?!” She stood before me, facing down Kudou. “Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied. “Just shut up for a second.”

What on earth is she planning? She’s not gonna try to use Closed Clock *to stop time and take Kudou out before she has the chance to steal it, is she?* It wouldn’t have been a totally hopeless plan, but it would’ve been a massive risk that hinged on the specifics of Kudou’s ability. If it activated in the literal instant she saw *Closed Clock* get used, she’d be able to steal it away before Tomoyo could do anything, and then we’d be finished. It would be an all-or-nothing gamble.

“So, you’ll be the first to offer me your power, Kanzaki Tomoyo?”

“Nah, wasn’t planning on it.”

“Hah! You’re planning *something*. I can tell that much. Well, fine. Have it your way. Go on—show me your power!”

“No.”

It was as blunt and concise as a reply could get, and Kudou obviously had no idea what to make of it. “Huh...? Wait, but...what?”

“If I show you my power, then you’ll just steal it, right? Of course I’m not gonna use it.”

Kudou stared blankly at Tomoyo, her eyes wide.

“When you took Andou’s power, you said, ‘There it is! You’ve shown me your power!’ Seems pretty easy to guess that your ability has a condition. You have to see the moment somebody activates their power if you wanna steal it, right?”

“That’s... I...”

“Looks like I’m right on the money. Yeah, there’s no way *any* of us are gonna use our powers now.”

I was just as taken aback by Tomoyo's declaration as Kudou was. *Oh... Oh, right! That* would *be an option! If using our powers means they get stolen, we can just* not *use them!* I hadn't considered the possibility at all. It felt like a massive loophole in the whole system. Like, seriously, who would ever think of walking into a supernatural battle and *not* using their supernatural powers?

"So, yeah, I guess that means this fight's gonna be hand to hand from here on out. Hey, Kudou, do you think you can take on all five of us in a fistfight at once?"

"Ugh... B-But I still have a trump card! I have Andou Jurai's power on my side! It may be one-on-five, but I'm the only one here who can actually use her power, which gives me the advantage!"

"No, Kudou! You don't understand a thing!" said Tomoyo with a gleeful, sadistic grin. "You've severely underestimated how useless Andou's power is! It's really, truly, one hundred percent useless!"

Kudou gasped in shock. The same sort of shock, incidentally, that I was feeling delivered directly to my heart. Like, couldn't she have been at least a *little* less direct about it? Maybe soften the blow just a tad?

"He he he he he!"

Suddenly, an unnerving laugh rang out.

"Now then, Miss Kudou, I believe it's time for us to battle!" said Sayumi, stepping up to the front line with a look on her face that said she was enjoying every *second* of this. "Or is five-on-one too one-sided for your taste? If that's the case, I'd be more than happy to take you on alone. I *am* the club president, after all!"

Sayumi, of course, was the most combat-capable member of the literary club by an absolute mile. "He he he!" she chuckled menacingly. "I must say, you gave me *quite* the scare! I do hope you'll forgive me if I'm so frightened I happen to forget to hold back."

"T-Takanashi...?" said Kudou, her voice quavering. "W-Wait, aren't you...?"

"A black belt in both judo and karate, yes. Is there a problem?"

Kudou squealed with terror, and Sayumi once again erupted into ecstatic laughter. She was venting all the stress that had built up over our encounter with Kudou, all at once. I just knew she was thinking something along the lines of "Oh, you're going to *pay* for scaring me like that, you little cretin!"

Kudou backpedaled, her face white as a sheet. I could tell from her expression that *Dark and Dark* was the only power she'd stolen up to that point. She didn't have anything else in stock to defend herself with.

"C-Crap!" With no hope of victory remaining, Kudou spun around on the spot and made a break for it. Unfortunately for her, it was too late. The door slammed shut before she could make her escape.

"You're not getting away that easily!" I shouted. I'd seen her flight coming and had stealthily crawled around behind her while her attention was focused on Sayumi.

“A-Andou…Jurai…”

“Mwa ha ha!” I cackled like a supervillain, basking in the triumphant glory of victory. “Everything’s gone *just* as planned!”

“Wh-What?!” Kudou’s eyes widened. “N-No way! You were aiming for this from the very beginning?!”

“Exactly!”

“You even saw through my ability in advance?! You were afraid of what might happen if I stole your allies’ powers, so you played the clown just as an act to make me drop my guard?! You used your own pathetically useless power as bait to figure out the specifics of *my* power and seal it away completely?! Although I thought you were just a buffoon, all of your idiocy was an act for the sake of setting up this very moment?!”

“Eeexactly!”

“Andou Jurai…what sort of Machiavellian genius *are* you?!”

“Mwa ha ha! Mwa ha ha ha ha! *Mwaaaaaa ha ha ha ha ha haaaaaa*!”

Holy crap! This is so! much! fun! I just used a worthless power to take down the strongest power around! Like, seriously, it feels like I’m savoring a pure distillation of the best the supernatural battle genre has to offer! Having everything go just according to plan: hella cool!

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, pal,” said Tomoyo, giving me a smack on the head. “‘Just as planned’ my ass. This was all a coincidence, and you know it.”

“Don’t be absurd! This is the *best* sorta plot twist! Every supernatural battle story has to have a moment where the protagonist defeats their mightiest foe only to have an even *mightier* foe emerge from the shadows and reveal that everything that’s happened, *including* the protagonist’s own actions, was all part of their master plan!”

“Sure, but what you’re doing here’s a laughably obvious retcon, at best!”

“Okay, but when you really think about it, most of the time that twists like that come up in manga or light novels, they couldn’t be anything but retcons either.”

“Don’t drag other people’s stories down to your level just to pad your ego!”

As Tomoyo and I kicked off another of our usual banter sessions, I glanced down at the ground. Sayumi had Kudou in a perfectly executed judo arm bar, her legs pinning the president firmly to the floor.

“Stoooooop!” wailed Kudou, practically in tears. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I regret everything! I take it all back, so please, just let me gooo!”

Hatoko walked over to me as I watched the spectacle unfold. “Hey, Juu…? What did she even want from us, anyway?”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. She’d popped up out of nowhere and gotten shut down just as abruptly. She was defeated before she even had the chance to establish her character and motivations.

In any case, I could say one thing for sure: the literary club's monumental, first ever supernatural battle ended with our overwhelming victory.

☆

A large cherry blossom tree grew outside the literary club's window, a short ways away from the school. Flower petals gently fluttered from its innumerable branches as young leaves grew to take their place.

On one of those branches, the leaves had company: a man, hanging upside-down from the bough like a bat. No, not hanging—he was *standing* upside-down. He wasn't holding on to anything, nor did anything seem to be supporting his weight. He was just standing there, plain and simple.

His black clothes and silvery-white hair were similarly unperturbed by the force of gravity. It was as if heaven and earth had decided to swap places exclusively in the man's immediate vicinity. If anyone had been around to observe his uncannily reversed silhouette, it would have evoked a distinct image: that of an inverted cross.

"Bwa ha ha!" the man laughed, in his own uniquely humorless way. He peered through his sunglasses into the window of the very literary club he had once called himself a member of. Within the clubroom, Andou Jurai was laughing as well, celebrating his successful repulsion of Kudou Mirei's attempted raid. Andou Jurai…or rather, Guiltia Sin Jurai.

The man who was staring so fixedly at Andou had heterochromatic eyes. His right eye was red, redder than red, a brighter red than the most vivid nightshade, a red more brilliant than the blood that ran through his veins—a crimson that put even the flames of hell to shame. His left eye, meanwhile, was black, blacker than black, a darker black than the darkest lacquerware, a black deeper than shadow—an ebon more intense than the dead of night.

That man, his eyes standing in such sharp contrast with one another, was none other than…*me*!

"Looks like this story's actually in first person!"

My little game of narrating my life in third person as if I were a character in some super cool novel complete, I returned my attention to the clubroom and the boy within. Andou Jurai had lived up to my expectations, or perhaps even exceeded them. Kudou Mirei had barely managed to put up a fight before he'd brought her down.

"Good thing too. Wouldn't be fun at all if he couldn't pull that much off. Bwa ha ha!"

"*There* you are, Hajime!"

Somebody called out a name—the name I'd taken on as an alias to use while I remained in this world. A moment later, ripples spread through the air in front of me, and from that warp in reality, a single woman appeared, intruding upon my upside-down domain. Everything about her, from the shade of her hair, to the color of her eyes, to the style of her clothes, felt disconnected from reality. More than anything else, though, the pair of tiny,

translucent wings that sprouted from her back were what identified her as a spirit.

"If it isn't Leatia. Need something?"

"Yeah, I need you to pick up your damn phone! You turned it off again, didn't you?"

"Yup. Didn't want you butting in and interrupting the show."

"Don't give me that shit! If you take more than five seconds to pick up when I call, it means you screwed the pooch! You got that, asshole?!" Leatia floated in front of me, scowling and cursing up a storm. She looked cute on the outside, but she just couldn't help herself from swearing like a sailor. "*Seriously*," she moaned, "couldn't they have put me in charge of a guy with looks *and* brains...?"

"The feeling's mutual," I replied. "I'd take someone who can actually appreciate my sense of aesthetics over *you* any day of the week."

"Uhh, seriously? You really think there's anyone out there who could get behind your gross-ass 'aesthetics'? You could search all over the human *and* the spirit realms and not even find a single person!"

"Oh, but I did find one," I said, staring once more through the literary club's window. The excitement in my tone wasn't an act; it came very naturally to me. "After year after year of nothing but dipshits who don't understand a thing about me, I finally found someone I can actually talk to."

Leatia just stared at me blankly.

"Anyway, think you could get outta my face? See the girl doing the arm bar in there? She's just one lucky move away from letting me see up her skirt, and you're blocking the view."

"Fuck you! Were you even listening, shit-for-brains?! I was trying to call you 'cause I have something important to talk about!"

"Hey." My words came out so cold and distant, I almost surprised myself. "I told you to move, didn't I? And look at you. Not moving. You know what that means, right?"

I didn't wait for her to reply. Without the slightest hint of hesitation, I let my destructive impulses take the wheel and unleashed my power.

"Lucifer's Strike."

A black orb materialized out of nowhere in front of Leatia's chest. It was roughly the size of a golf ball, and it was so potently, profoundly dark, it seemed to devour the very light around it.

"Huh?! W-Wait a second! Cut it—"

Leatia didn't even have time to cry out in horror before the ball of darkness consumed her whole. And not just her—matter, light, and even space itself were swallowed up at an explosive pace. Picture the water getting drained out of a pool, and you'll have the right idea.

That was my power: the ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, fit to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them, *Lucifer's Strike*. It granted me the power to desecrate the force of gravity. It was, quite literally, a destructive

force powerful enough to bring down the heavens above and turn the world on its head. It was the symbol of my rebellion against God.

The black orb that I'd made was a miniature black hole, a product of fine-tuned manipulation of gravity. There's no way to dodge an attack like that. How could you evade a gravitational field so powerful that even space-time is twisted by its influence? Anything and everything that existed within its area of effect would be crushed by the hand of an invisible giant, condensed to a single point by pure, overwhelming pressure.

I, however, grasped that all-consuming orb in my own hand and instantly destroyed it. And it felt *incredible*. It felt like I held the world itself within the palm of my hand.

"Bwa ha ha ha! Bwaaa ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Okay, for real, *literally* drop dead!" shouted Leatia, who was still right in front of me, completely unharmed and unambiguously pissed. "You *know* that those powers don't work on spirits, right? What the hell were you trying to accomplish with that?"

"Bwa ha ha! Setting the tone, of course! You gotta bust out your secret move every once in a while. Imagine if I actually needed to use it, but it'd been so long since the last time I'd done it that I screwed it up. That'd be the worst, right?"

"Remind me again, who was it that crushed *F* without even using his power so much as once?" I didn't bother to answer her question, so she carried on. "They really did have a godlike power on their side. Even the War Management Committee was treating them as a serious threat that would have to be dealt with... And yet, a single man took them down, all on his own..."

"What about it? Got a problem with that?"

She gave me a long, appraising look. "Just how serious are you about all this?"

"I'm always totally serious about everything," I replied. "Do you remember what I said a year ago, when you gave me this power? I told you I would rule over this War, and I meant it."

"Is that why you're keeping them isolated from the War?" asked Leatia, disregarding half of what I'd said and turning her gaze to the literary club. "To keep part of your fighting force in reserve?"

Half a year ago, those five children were made to awaken to supernatural powers.

Dark and Dark: Andou Jurai.

Closed Clock: Kanzaki Tomoyo.

Over Element: Kushikawa Hatoko.

Sweet and Sour Pineapple: Himeki Chifuyu.

And *Route of Origin*: Takanashi Sayumi.

I feel like I might've gotten one of those a little wrong, but I can't remember how it *was* supposed to go, so whatever. Now *that* was a solid set

of titles, seriously. I would've liked to have named my little sister's power myself, honestly, but that's water under the bridge.

"Four out of five of them ended up with ridiculously powerful abilities," said Leatia. "In terms of pure power alone, in fact, they're in the top class of all the Players participating in the War. If those four girls joined your team, I can only imagine how—"

"You've misjudged me, Leatia," I said, cutting her off. I looked my Spirit Handler right in the eye. "I just don't want my sister getting wrapped up in the War, that's all. I was a worthless older brother, but if I can protect her from all this, then I want to do that, at the very least..."

"Oh, spare me the stupid jokes. I haven't known you for long, but I know you well enough to know that's not your style."

"Oh, do you?" *What a shame. Girls who can't take a joke bore me to tears.* "There's one more thing you're wrong about, Leatia. The scariest out of those five isn't one of the girls. No, the most frightening of all of them is him—Andou Jurai."

"*Him*? You're screwing with me, right? That guy's power's as trash-tier as it gets. He's far and away the smallest small fry out of all the Players! All there's to say about him is that he really drew the short straw."

"You just don't get it. How many times have I told you that the power of chuunibyou makes the world go round?"

My thoughts turned to Andou. To Guiltia Sin Jurai. To the man I'd been waiting for this whole time. To the man who was both my lifelong comrade in arms and my fated arch-enemy.

"He'll step forward to stand against me, someday. He'll be my strongest...and *final* foe."

"Seriously...just die, please. I can't believe how hard it is to drag a coherent thought outta your thick-ass skull." Leatia clicked her tongue at me. It was obvious she didn't have the slightest idea about my true intentions.

I was used to people not understanding the way I thought, though, so I just brushed it off. I've always been misunderstood. I've lived a life of constant rejection. I've suffered loss after loss at the hands of this society that's so dead set in its confidence that its ways are the *only* ways.

"Then again, as much as we get along, we really couldn't be more different," I added. "He's the sort of chuuni who spends his classes fantasizing about what he'd do to save everyone if terrorists took over the school. *I'm* the sort of chuuni who fantasized about the best way to massacre everyone in the classroom."

We were similar, yet different on an absolute and insurmountable level. Identical on the surface, but polar opposites inside.

Kiryuu Hajime and Andou Jurai. Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First and Guiltia Sin Jurai.

"So, hey, question. Just what *are* you trying to do, in the end?" asked Leatia with a skeptical, appraising glare.

“I want to be Don Quixote,” I answered off the cuff. I wanted to be the ever-dreaming fool who hurled down his gauntlet to the world; the man who stayed true to his beliefs and fought for them to the bitter end, even as he was scorned, ridiculed and despised by his peers; the first and greatest case study in chuunibyou.

Leatia looked confused. “You…want to be a discount department store?”

Oh, come on. Why does absolutely everyone think of Don Quijote first? “Anyway, didn’t you want me for something, Leatia?”

“Ah, right! I finally found the next Player for you to battle!”

“Their power?”

“Unknown.”

“Good. That’s how a supernatural battle should be.”

“Don’t get complacent, dipshit. Your next target’s tough enough to have taken down several other Players already. Sounds like they’re one of your people—the ones who actually *like* fighting.”

“Hah! Bring it on! It doesn’t matter who I’m up against. Anyone who tries to defy me gets a one-way ticket to The Heavens’ Hell.”

“Of *course* you’d drop your lame-ass catchphrase there. Please, I’m begging you, just die already.”

“Bwa ha ha!”

I returned my gravity to normal and dropped from the cherry tree’s branch, activating my ability once more a mere instant before I collided with the ground and setting my weight to virtually zero for a flawless and soundless touchdown. Then I set off with Leatia floating along at my side.

“Guiltia Sin Jurai. *Endless Paradox*. And…err, the rest of you guys too.” I spoke quietly to myself, not even turning around. “You’re not ready for supernatural battles yet. You can stay here in your little slice of life and carry on your meaningless, commonplace antics…for now.”

Epilogue

"So, what *was* that all about in the end?" I asked. "Y'know, the whole thing with Kudou."

Everyone replied with shrugs, cocked heads, and mumbles of "Who knows?" A day had passed since her attempted raid, and we were all together in the clubroom after school once again. Thinking back on the whole debacle, it struck me that we actually knew next to nothing about her.

Kudou remained steadfast in her retelling of events (obtained through application of a painful arm bar)—"Nooo, stoooooop! I'm sorry! I don't actually know anything about you people at all! I just got carried away, that's all! I'm so, so, sorry, so pleeease, stoooooop!"—so apparently it really was the truth of the matter.

She did give some more details, though. From the sound of things, she'd awakened to her supernatural power about a month beforehand. The nature of her power meant that she couldn't use it at all in isolation, but regardless, the paranormal nature of the whole deal scared the wits out of her, and she'd been living in fear ever since.

Then, a week or so ago, she'd received a text from a mysterious unknown number that read "The members of the literary club have the same sort of supernatural power as you." She started monitoring us that very same day, and it wasn't long before she'd discovered that we really were in the same situation as she was. Anyway, one thing led to another, and it all culminated in yesterday's battle, in which I'd mustered up all my chuuni power and played a starring role.

"I…I was so scaaared!" she bawled. "I got this power out of nowhere, and there was just one of me and *five* of you! I thought that you'd beat me for sure if I let you have the initiative, so I decided to pick a fight myself! Please, just let me off the hook already! And aaagh, let gooo, my arm's gonna breeeak!"

She was like an exchange student who decided to playact as a delinquent out of fear they'd get bullied otherwise. So, long story short, I didn't think she was a bad person at heart. She *did* give *Dark and Dark* back to me right away, after all. *Seriously, thank goodness. I'll never let anyone take you away from me ever again,* Dark and Dark*!*

"Well, it's not like Kudou's the real problem anyway," said Tomoyo. "I'm way more worried about whoever sent that text."

"True enough," I agreed. Whoever they were, they'd known that we had powers. That *had* to mean that they were involved in our powers' awakening somehow.

"I suppose this means that some unknown party really did cause our powers to awaken," speculated Sayumi in a slightly anxious tone of voice.

Hatoko shot me a pleading sort of look. “Juu…what’s gonna happen to us? Was it really all just a coincidence that nothing’s happened for the past half a year? Is this just the beginning…?”

I didn’t know what to say. We were shockingly ignorant when it came to our powers. We’d spent half a year mulling over them, yet we were still stuck in the blind hypothesis stage.

Kudou wasn’t actually our enemy, in the end, but for all we knew, a *real* foe could turn up at any moment. It seemed totally possible that we’d unknowingly set foot into a new world that far exceeded the limits of our imaginations, and the fear of our own ignorance weighed heavily upon us. A somber silence fell over the room.

Or, at least, it fell over us high schoolers. “It’ll be okay. I’m not scared of stuff I don’t know about,” said Chifuyu, her usual flat tone totally unaffected by our gloom. “I don’t know about Japanese politics, I don’t know why people are born, and I don’t know what’s past the edge of the universe, but I’m still alive.”

She paused her speech for a moment to struggle with a bag of potato chips that was stubbornly resisting her best efforts to open it. After a few seconds of strained grunting, she exhausted herself and picked up the thought process she’d left dangling.

“The world’s full of stuff we don’t know about. But we all just keep living anyway.”

The high school squad was speechless. *H-Holy crap, that was deep…*

“We learned about all that in school today,” Chifuyu added. “They said that when you think too much about that stuff, it’s called ‘worrying about nothing.’”

“Worrying about nothing…” I muttered to myself. Maybe she’s right. If the best we can do is guess blindly, then what’s the point of thinking about it at all? We only get one shot at high school, so why should we waste it worrying about a hypothetical enemy that may or may not even exist? Wasting this time instead of enjoying it for a reason like that would be the height of stupidity!

“What happens, happens,” concluded Chifuyu with a confident nod. I was genuinely sorta impressed. Astonished, even, but I wasn’t about to admit that I’d been astonished by a grade schooler, so I decided to respond in my usual way.

“Mwa ha ha! That was a superlative summary of my thoughts on the matter, Himeki Chifuyu—nay, *World Create*!”

“Tch-tch!” Chifuyu scolded, waving one of her little fingers at me. “I’m not *World Create*. I want you to call me *Sweet and Sour Pineapple*.”

“I, uhh…guess you really took a shine to that title, huh?”

“Yeah. I wanna make it my power’s name too.”

“Please, don’t! Anything but that!” I spent an eternity thinking up those names! I themed them perfectly to give us all a sense of team unity!

I somehow managed to persuade Chifuyu to give up on the name change, then turned to address everyone at once. “All right, I think we’ve settled on a plan of action: we’ll keep doing things exactly the same way we’ve been doing them so far. Okay?”

The others nodded in agreement. Not a single objection.

“Mwa ha ha! Don’t worry! You all have nothing to fear! Even should disaster strike, you have *me*, Guiltia Sin Jurai, here to defend you!”

I busted out the coolest line I could think of, but for some reason, everybody just quietly stared at me for a minute, then heaved a collective sigh. *H-Huh...? This isn’t how I pictured this turning out!*

“You’ve got a way of *sounding* cool, at least,” sighed Tomoyo. “*Just* sounding cool.”

“Being all talk and no action is his most fundamental character trait, after all,” agreed Sayumi.

“Juu really never changes!” added Hatoko.

“Andou, help me open this,” said Chifuyu.

Their reactions were even worse than I’d feared. Chifuyu’s was the worst: she hadn’t even reacted at all, brushing me off entirely to ask for a favor. I dejectedly accepted the bag of potato chips from her, gripped it with both hands, mustered up all my strength, and—*Huh?*

“Wow, okay. This bag’s putting up a real fight. Hyaaah!” I gave it my best shot once more, but I wasn’t getting anywhere. “Gahhh! Ugh... No dice...”

“Don’t pull a muscle, Andou,” said Tomoyo as she pulled out a pair of scissors. “You’re not a caveman. We have tools for this.”

“N-Nah, I’m good. I’ve come this far, so I wanna see if I can get it open with my own strength.”

“Wooow. Pointless much?”

“If I give up now, I’ll...I’ll lose sight of myself for sure!”

“Please, save lines like that for moments that actually deserve them.”

“Hurry up, Andou.”

“Don’t worry, Chifuyu! I swear I’ll open this bag, come hell or high water! Hrrraaauuuggghhhhhh!” I poured every fiber of my being into tearing the bag asunder, but still, it wouldn’t budge. “*Damnations*! I will *never* submit to the likes of you! Uggghhhrrraaaaaahhh!”

My fingers grew numb, and the strength gradually drained from my arms. My whole body was screaming “Stop! Just give up!” while the gazes of my friends were screaming “We don’t really care, but could you at least stop shouting about it?”

But like hell I will! How could I possibly back down after coming this far?! I want to be strong! Strong enough to tear that bag wide open! Limits? I don’t give a damn about those! Just watch! Here and now, I’ll take my limits... and break them!

Thump!

"Wha…? Huh…?" I felt something *click* deep within me, as if cogs that had been spinning freely up to that moment were suddenly working together in unison. A moment later, black flames erupted from my body of their own volition. I stood in the center of a bonfire of unprecedented proportions.

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“Wh-What’re you doing, Andou? Why’d you bring out *Dark and Dark*…?” asked Tomoyo. She sounded confused, and the others looked just as shocked as she did.

I probably looked shocked too, honestly. *Dark and Dark* had never manifested itself in that sort of form before. I felt…no, I *sensed* that I’d stepped across some sort of boundary. This could only mean one thing.

“I’ve…awakened…”

“You…*what*?”

“I broke my limits and awakened…”

I understood what had happened to me on an intuitive, almost instinctual, level. My strength of will had stoked the obsidian flames that slumbered deep within me, unlocking my supernatural power’s potential and bringing it to its next stage. I’d been preparing myself for this moment since the day after my power first awakened, and spoke the name my power had finally earned.

“Dark and Dark…of the End!”

Everyone present, me included, fell into a stunned silence. The seconds dragged by excruciatingly slowly, until finally, we broke out of the spell and cried out in unison.

“*Now*, of all times?!”

I’d always operated under the assumption that my power would follow the guiding principles of classic plot developments and awaken anew in a moment of crisis. Apparently, my “moment of crisis” had just turned out to be “not being strong enough to open a bag of chips.” *I guess it was a moment of crisis for my dignity, or something? And come* on*, I didn’t even get the thing open in the end! Throw me a bone here,* Dark and Dark*!*

“Andou…is this supposed to be a joke, or something?” asked Tomoyo.

“Do you seriously think I could awaken for a one-off gag?! Actually…let’s think about this from a different perspective. Doesn’t awakening that easily make me way more useful than a character who can’t awaken without a couple of his friends getting killed off first?”

“It’s certainly an Andou-level awakening, I’ll admit that much.”

“Hold up a second, Sayumi. What’s that supposed to mean? Are you trying to say that awakening at a really weird moment’s on-brand for me, or something?”

“I’m so happy for you, Juu! You finally made the dream you wrote in our elementary school graduation album come true!”

“Oh, yeah. I guess I did write that my dream for the future was ‘to have an awakening,’ now that you mention it.”

“I don’t care about all that. Andou, gimme my chips back.”

“You could try to show at least a *little* interest in me as a person, Chifuyu…”

I sighed. I’d managed to awaken, which *should’ve* been a big, special sorta deal, but the whole thing ended up feeling sorta pathetic in a way I

couldn’t quite put my finger on instead. Last-second awakenings are one of my favorite plot twists, but when it happens at the actual, literal last second—in a moment of everyday peace and quiet worthy of a story’s epilogue—it’s just not the same.

“Anyway, Andou, you awakened! Good for you! But what does that actually *mean*, specifically?” asked Tomoyo.

“Hmm. Let’s see...” I gave it some thought, and I found that I had a vague, instinctual understanding of how my power had changed. I wouldn’t know the exact details until I gave it a try for myself, though.

Dark and Dark had reached its next stage. And that next stage turned out to be...

Afterword

Who is it that comes up with the names for all the powers and special moves and stuff you see in fiction, anyway?

In retrospect, I think that question was where this series really began for me. Fiction's filled with all sorts of proper nouns and technical terms, but most of the time, the question of who defined those terms in-universe gets a handwave, at best. I'm sure everyone's seen a character in some battle manga bust out a brand new special move with a super flashy name and thought, "Wait, did he think that up himself?" at *some* point, right?

That's how I decided to write a series where that sort of thing wouldn't be handwaved in the slightest. I'd depict the process in detail! Specifying the origins of all the proper nouns as much as possible was one of the driving concepts behind this series on the whole. There would be no names spontaneously popping into the characters' heads at just the right moment here—no, my characters are all the sort of people who spend night after night doggedly flipping through their dictionaries in search of *just* the right word!

So anyway, with all that out of the way... Hi! Kota Nozomi here.

If I had to pin down this story's theme in a single word, I suppose I'd have to go with "chuunibyou." Which is, of course, way too deep and way too obscure of a theme for an author as inexperienced as I am to take on! The truth of the matter is that the more I dug into the topic, the more I realized I'd never be done researching it. Chuunibyou somehow gets *harder* to understand the more you learn about it. The harder you chase after the essence of its meaning, the farther away the meaning appears. It's just that abstract and poorly defined of a concept.

Anyway, now that I've referred to my book's central theme as "an abstract concept" and tried to make myself look smart in the most chuuni-tastic way possible, I'd like to say a few words of thanks!

First up is my editor, Nakamizo, who provided an incredible amount of support over the course of this novel's creation. I'm grateful beyond words for all their help, without which a book as unfocused and meandering as this one would probably never have managed to make it out the door.

Next up is my illustrator, 029. I'm extremely thankful that they were willing to take on this job in spite of their incredibly busy schedule. I take my hat off to the sheer skill it must have taken to bring forth such beautiful drawings from my writing.

Finally, I'd like to express the greatest of thanks to every last one of the readers who were willing to give a book that can't quite decide if it wants to be a supernatural battle story or a slice of life a chance.

That's all for now! May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

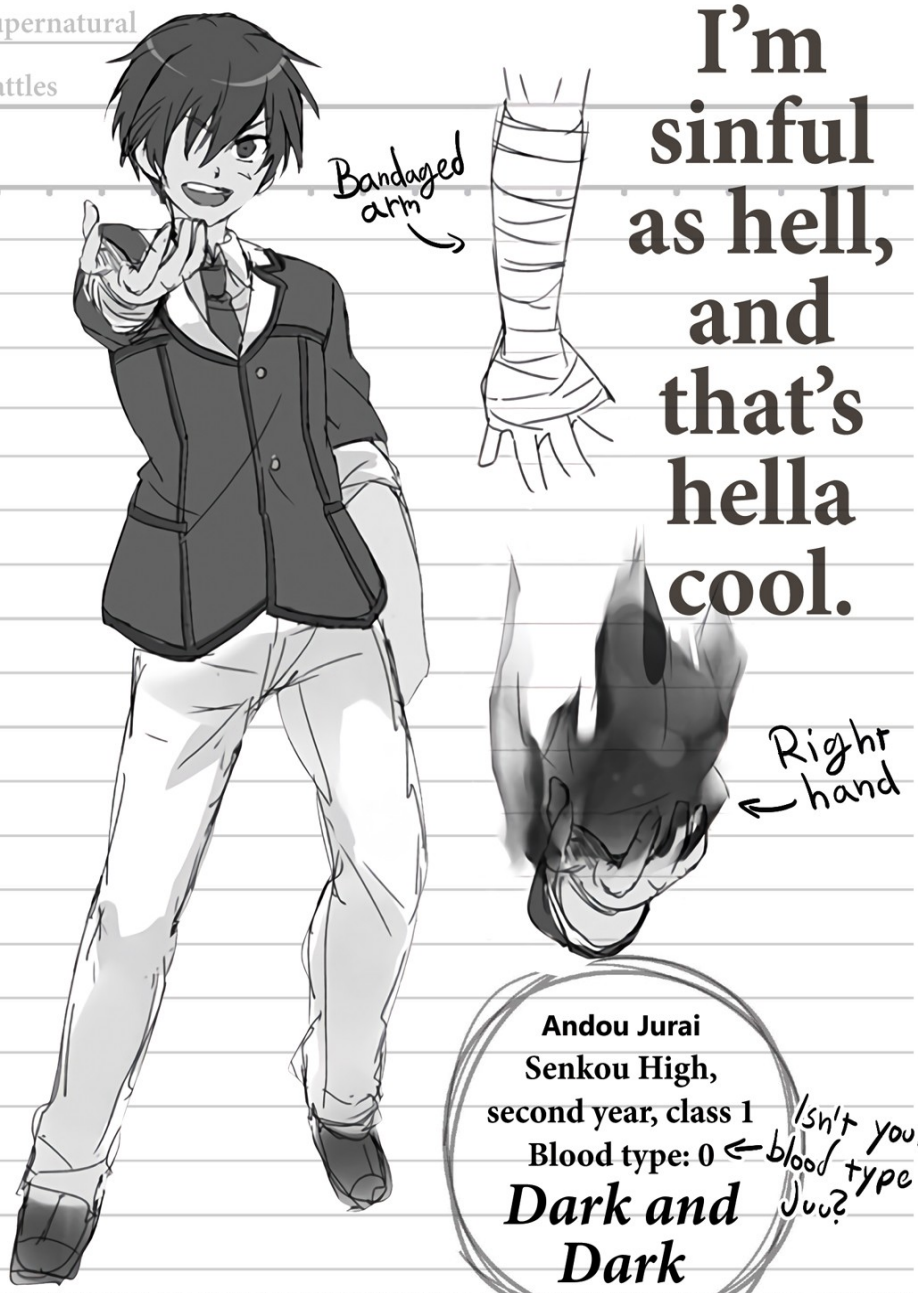
Kota Nozomi

Oh, and one last thing—if you turn to the next page, you'll find a sort of prologue for the next volume. Please give it a read if you're interested!

CHARACTER FILE 05

Supernatural Battles

I'm sinful as hell, and that's hella cool.



Andou Jurai
Senkou High, second year, class 1
Blood type: 0 ← Isn't your blood type O, Juu?

Dark and Dark

His is the power to call down Hell on Earth.

Dark and Dark **allows the user to summon the sable flames of purgatory into the living realm, with their soul as the price. It's a forbidden power that's darker, deeper and more sinful than any other. Each time it is used, its darkness eats away at the fabric of the user's being. The one who bears its curse, Andou Jurai, lived a previous life as Guiltia, the lord of the Demon Realm, where black flames were abhorred by the masses as cursed lightning since time immemorial. And right they were to do so: on a fundamental level, both are examples of chemical reactions—in fact, according to the classical elemental theories of Empedocles, the two share a-** Everyone knows you're just making this crap up!

Get a grip, Chuuni-boy!

Excerpt from the Bloody Vivre

A Preview for Next Time: A Glimpse into Kudou Mirei's State of Mind

I sighed. School had ended, and I was alone in the student council room. The other members of the council and I didn't have a meeting planned, but I had some work I needed to finish up, so I'd ended up staying here on my own.

There was something about the deserted room that made me feel a little lonely. Maybe that's why my thoughts turned to the literary club? I found myself wondering if they were all together again today, raising a ruckus in the boisterous way they always did.

It had been about a month since my power had awakened. One day, a mysterious light engulfed me out of the blue, and the next thing I knew, I'd obtained the power to steal other people's powers. The second it awakened in me, I had a vague understanding of its nature and effects.

No, actually, that's not quite right. It wasn't that I suddenly learned about it so much as that I suddenly realized I already understood it. I don't really know how to put it into words. It was like the moment I obtained my power, I also discovered a really poorly written instruction manual for it sitting inside my mind. It was like it had always been there—like it belonged there.

Of course, considering the "poorly written" part, I didn't understand everything there was to know about my power by a long shot. I didn't exactly ask, but I had a feeling the same was true for all the members of the literary club as well. One thing I did know for sure, though, was that my power was different from theirs in one major way: it had absolutely no effect on its own. As such, the first time I *actually* ever used a supernatural power had been the day before.

I sighed again. Thinking back to that day was putting me in a glum mood. The arm that Takanashi had put into a lock still stung when I moved it. She hadn't broken it or anything, but she also hadn't used her power to heal it after she was finished interrogating me. I'd brought it upon myself, of course, so I couldn't exactly complain.

I must've been out of my mind. I had lost all self-composure the moment that Andou Jurai saw through to my true identity. The worst part was that deep down, all I really wanted was to be a part of their group.

"How did it turn out like this…? I bet they're asking themselves, 'What on earth was that girl trying to accomplish?' at this very moment…" I pressed my face against the table and wrapped my arms around my head.

Really, though, from a certain perspective, it might've been a good thing it had turned out that way. I'd been trying to use my position as the student council president to make contact with them in the most roundabout of ways ever since I got that mysterious text that revealed their identities, but

thanks to Andou Jurai, the distance between me and them had shrunk massively in an instant.

That's right… It was thanks to Andou Jurai. I'd taken him for just another idiot back when I was monitoring him at a distance, but when we faced each other as enemies in their clubroom, he completely betrayed that expectation. When I revealed my true identity, the first thing all his clubmates did was look to him. It was like they were waiting for him to tell them what to do—like he was their leader.

Most likely, none of them were even aware of that fact. I was sure their reliance on him was totally unconscious. That, above all else, was the proof that he stood at the center of their little circle. I understood very well just how much faith those girls had in him.

"Andou Jurai…" I muttered his name out loud. Then I tried writing it down in a notebook that was lying close at hand…though I erased it again a moment later out of sheer embarrassment. "I-In any case, I now know for a fact that he's no ordinary person!"

Bringing the others together as a group wasn't his only ability. He was also keenly observant enough to see through to the truth of my visit. He *looked* like an idiot at a glance, sure, but he'd proven himself to be a calculating mastermind at every opportunity. He'd even had the creativity to put an utterly worthless power to use, and to great effect, at that. It may have *seemed* that Kanzaki Tomoyo or Takanashi were the ones who won the day in the end, but I was positive that was only because he let them step in to take the credit.

"He's incredible…" Struck all over again by how formidable a man he was, I found myself pressing a hand to my chest. Ever since that day, my heart had started pounding every time I thought about him. He set it aflutter. I'd blush and daydream, and I had the strangest twinge in my chest that just wouldn't go away.

"Andou Jurai…" I couldn't take my mind off him. He was probably still in the literary club's room at that very moment.

I reached into my pocket and unfolded the sheet of paper I was carrying inside. It was the love letter that Andou Jurai had left for me. Then I grinned, chuckling to myself like a fool.

"Andou Jurai—I've fallen for you!"

KOTA NOZOMI PRESENTS★★★

ILLUSTRATOR: 029

WI
S
BA
BE
COMMONPLACE

©029

"Nice one, chuuni-girl!"
"W-W-W-
Were you
WATCHING?"
GYAAAHH!
The closet nerd
who rules over time
KANZAKI
TOMOYO
The boy who
loves superpowers,
especially his own
ANDOU
JURAI
© 029

Kushikawa Hatoko
The childhood friend who
commands the elements
Takanashi Sayumi
The club president who
restores the natural order
Himeki Chifuyu
The fourth grader who can
make anything from nothing
We who awakened
were all tormented by the same doubt.
The weight of life was too heavy for us to bear...
so we decided to do whatever we wanted to.
© 029

Bonus Translation Notes: On Chuunibyou

Hello, and thank you for reading the first volume of *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace*! This is your translator, Tristan, here to bring you all the notes and insights into the translation of this ridiculous series that I can offer!

Supernatural Battles is a series that is *very* firmly rooted in the pop culture of its time. Almost a decade later, however, its references are, well…a little dated, to say the least, but they're also a fascinating time capsule for the trends of the era! As such, I've decided to use this translator's notes section to run through the many, *many* references and pop-culture shoutouts in each volume.

Before I start on that, though, I'd like to take a moment to discuss a concept that's extremely important for this series: chuunibyou. The series does a good job defining the concept of chuunibyou—and believe me, it's nowhere *near* done discussing it—but I feel like a little extra real-world context on the word is merited! Chuuni is complicated, as Chifuyu would put it.

Let's start at the beginning, which allegedly dates back to January 1999, when the radio personality Ijuin Hikaru jokingly coined the term. It would seem that the way Ijuin used the word was pretty distinct from what it would eventually evolve into—from what I can gather, he used it to mean embarrassing behavior characteristic of that stage of childhood. The certain aesthetic flair that's associated with the term these days was, for the most part, not present. Ijuin asked listeners to submit stories about their own chuuni moments and read them for a segment on his radio show that lasted for around three months before the bit got stale and he stopped doing it.

The term lapsed into obscurity for several years after that point, but eventually it resurfaced in the most predictable place possible: the internet. Specifically, it surfaced somewhere around the year 2005 on 2channel, an extremely popular image board that directly inspired the English-speaking internet's 4chan. Many aspects of the modern usage of chuunibyou—the "evil eye" association, the general air of humorous self-deprecation that surrounds the term, the borderline delusional obsession with being somehow *special*—date back to this era of its usage.

This is also where the spelling of the word 'chuunibyou' that *Supernatural Battles* favors originated. While the word was originally written "□□□"—the first two characters meaning "second year of middle school" and the third meaning "sickness"—the 2channel/*Supernatural Battles* spelling swaps out the first character for □. This character can be pronounced the same way as □, and it's broadly used in derogatory internet slang. (□ literally means "kitchen," but its literal meaning is entirely

unrelated.) The original spelling is still used in most contexts, and the fact that *Supernatural Battles* features the 2channel version is indicative of how internet subcultures had a heavy influence on its content.

Anyway, it wasn't long before the term started slipping off the internet and into the real world, and it was only a matter of time before somebody decided to actually take it seriously. That somebody turned out to be a man named Saegami Hyoya, who published a book called the *Chuunibyou User Manual* in 2009, codifying the three types of chuuni as he perceived them.

Normally, this is the part where I'd describe those three types, but I actually don't have to, since Tomoyo already did it for me back in Chapter 1! When she talks about "all the different types of chuunibyou," the three examples that she gives are simplified descriptions of the three types that Saegami identified. I think it's safe to say that the *User Manual* was used as reference material for this novel.

All right, I've been rambling on for long enough, and we have a lot of ground left to cover—let's get started on those references! I'll be organizing this section chronologically by chapter, and omitting references that get directly explained within the text itself.

Chapter 1:

△ …a hundred magical children will be dispatched from another world…

This is a reference to (and more or less a plot summary of) *Zatch Bell*, a popular battle manga by Raiku Makoto that ran from 2001 to 2007.

△ …we'll be inexplicably drawn together to take part in bizarre battles!

This is the first of *many* references to *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, a classic battle manga by Hirohiko Araki that started in 1987 and is still running as of the writing of this section. The JoJo rabbithole is a deep one, but for the sake of this line specifically, all that you need to know is that the series features an elaborate set of supernatural powers called Stands wielded by individuals called Stand Users, and these individuals are drawn to each other by a mysterious and ill-defined force.

△ …it's like a combination of The World and Clock Up.

The World just so happens to be another *JoJo* reference: it's a Stand that gives its user the ability to stop time. Clock Up, meanwhile, is a supernatural power from *Kamen Rider Kabuto*. *Kamen Rider* is a live-action superhero series: it is (in some ways) the sister series to *Super Sentai*, which is perhaps best known outside Japan for being re-edited and adapted into *Power Rangers*. To make a long story short, every *Kamen Rider* series is about people who wear special belts that allow them to transform into armored superheroes. In *Kabuto*, that transformation is accompanied by the Clock Up effect, which causes the transformed characters to move at outlandishly superhuman speeds, effectively causing time to stop for the rest of the world.

△ …though Sayumi's family name was spelled with totally different characters than the more well-known Takanashis out there.

While 'the more well-known Takanashis' could refer to any number of characters, I'm inclined to believe that this line was specifically in reference to Takanashi Rikka, a central character in the light novel series *Love, Chuunibyou & Other Delusions*. Considering how the first volume of that series came out almost exactly a year before volume one of *Supernatural Battles* and that the two series overlap substantially in terms of themes and subject matter, it's easy to imagine that this was a subtle but deliberate shoutout. Note that the Takanashi phenomenon continues to this day, with the VTuber Takanashi Kiara being a contemporary example.

△ …I'd say it's a lot like how Shining Diamond's power or Inoue Orihime's Rejection of Events works.

Shining Diamond is a Stand from *JoJo* that (to put it simply) has the power to heal and repair objects and people by punching them really, really hard. Inoue Orihime, meanwhile, is a character from *Bleach*, a manga by Kubo Tite that ran in *Shonen Jump* from 2001 to 2016. Rejection of Events is an aspect of her power set that (again, to put it simply) allows her to undo events that have occurred.

△ …issues of Jump from the golden age when Dragon Ball, Slam Dunk, Yu Yu Hakusho, JoJo Part 3, and Otokojuku were all running concurrently…

While most of these series have been localized and gained a western following, *Sakigake! Otokojuku* is an exception. The series was a comedic school battle manga by Miyashita Akira that ran from 1985 to 1991, and it was never released in English in any capacity.

△ …the Used Bookstore of the Divine: God Off.

"God Off" is a play on "Book Off," a franchise of secondhand book stores that's extremely widespread in Japan. Other stores in the Off franchise include Home Off (for household appliances and clothing), Hobby Off (for, well, hobby stuff) and, most entertainingly from an English perspective, Hard Off (for hardware and electronics).

△ She asked you, not the leader of the Phantom Brigade.

In this line, Tomoyo is calling Andou out on the fact that he just directly quoted Chrollo Lucilfer, a character from Togashi Yoshihiro's *Hunter x Hunter*.

△ People like you are always going on about how 'L'Arc-en-Ciel's the visual kei band, right?' or 'Nisioisin's the light novel author, right?'

L'Arc-en-Ciel is a Japanese rock band that is, in fact, associated with the visual kei movement. Visual kei bands are largely characterized by their extremely distinct visual aesthetic—think goth meets glam rock, basically (though it's really a lot more complicated than that). Nisio Isin, meanwhile, is the author of the ever-popular *Monogatari* series of light novels.

△ I bet you only bother with the surveys cause you read about them in Bakuman, you bandwagon jumper!

Bakuman was a *Jump* manga by Ohba Tsugumi and Obata Takeshi (the author/artist pair of *Death Note* fame) that ran from 2008 to 2012. The series was about the life and careers of a pair of aspiring manga creators. The reader surveys in question are included in every issue of *Shonen Jump*, and they're used by the magazine's editorial staff to assess the popularity of the various series that run in it.

△ ***…there've been all sorts of Kamen Riders over the franchise's history; some of the riders in Ryuki and Faiz weren't exactly great people, for example.***

The *Kamen Rider* franchise is notable for dealing with some pretty dark themes that *Super Sentai* shows are much less likely to touch on. It's common for riders to get killed off, for instance, and in some cases, riders even commit murder. This is especially true of the *Kamen Rider* series that aired in the early 2000s, a category that both *Ryuki* and *Faiz* fall into.

Chapter 2:

△ As Shinomori Aoshi would put it, "I know your swordsmanship all too well—after all, it is my own."

Shinomori Aoshi is a character from Watsuki Nobuhiro's *Rurouni Kenshin*, a samurai battle manga set in the late 1800s. This particular quote was pulled from a chapter very late in the series' run in which Shinomori defeats a mimic who replicates Shinomori's strengths as a sword fighter, thus inadvertently also replicating his weaknesses as well.

△ The JoJo in Part Five got to be called GioGio instead just because it was set in Italy...

Each plot arc (or "part") of *JoJo* stars a new main character, and every main character has a name that allows them to be referred to by the nickname JoJo. Part 5's protagonist, Giorno Giovanna, slightly subverts that trend, but as Andou notes, it's okay because he's Italian.

△ Take the volleyball team 'the Oriental Witches,' or how Kazuhiro Sasaki was called 'Daimajin' by his fans.

The Oriental Witches was the nickname of Nichibo Kaizuka, an extremely successful women's volleyball team that won two Olympic gold medals over the course of its existence. The nickname was given to them by the European media after they went on a particularly devastating winning streak during a tour in 1961.

Kazuhiro Sasaki, meanwhile, is a baseball player who played in both the Japanese league and the MLB. *Daimajin* was a series of Japanese kaiju films—think *Godzilla*, but a giant living statue instead of a lizard—and Sasaki earned the nickname thanks to his supposed resemblance to said living statue.

△ Like 'the Comedy Craftsmen of the Heisei Era,' or 'the Wizards of Words,' right?

"The Comedy Craftsmen of the Heisei Era" is almost certainly a play on the fan nickname given to Summers, an extremely famous manzai comedy duo. Their actual, real-world nickname would translate as "The Comedy Craftsmen of the East."

Unfortunately, the origin of "the Wizards of Words" proved impossible to track down, largely due to the fact that a totally unrelated manzai duo received the fan nickname "the Wizards of Vegetable Peelers" in 2020. Any attempt to run a search for "the Wizards of Words" in the context of manzai pulls up the peeler people exclusively, and if there ever was a means to track down the duo this is referencing, it seems to be lost to time.

△ She watched a super long-running comedy show called Shoten on a weekly basis, and she actually cried when the M-1 Grand Prix comedy competition went off the air.

Shoten and the M-1 are both real comedy TV programs! The former has been airing continuously every Sunday since 1966, and the latter is an annual competition. While the M-1 did indeed go off the air in 2010, it actually went through a revival in 2015 and has been airing annually once again ever since.

△ But when the protagonist of that basketball comedy light novel I read the other day gave girls titles as presents, they were over the moon for it…

This one's a reference to *Ro-Kyu-Bu!*, a light novel series by Aoyama Sagu that ran from 2009 to 2015. The plot centers around a high schooler who gets recruited to coach an elementary school girls' basketball team. I highly recommend against looking it up in public.

△ Kiyomori of the Taira

Kiyomori is both a historical figure who played a major part in the Genpei War, a Japanese civil war that took place in the late 12th century, and also a major character in *The Tale of the Heike*, an epic retelling of said war that dates back to somewhere around the 14th century.

△ Her chuuni power level—it's over nine thousaaand!

This line required less localization than you might imagine! When localizing Japanese internet memes, it's common practice to swap in a close-to-equivalent meme that your readership is more likely to understand. In this case, however, the original line was not only also from *Dragon Ball*, it was even from the exact same scene in *Dragon Ball*, just two lines before the one we went with! By happy coincidence, the English and Japanese-speaking fanbases for the show both turned lines with similar meanings from that very same exchange into memes.

△ I can't see the limit of her chuuni level! If I used Hakoware on her, how long would it take for her to go bankrupt?!

This is an almost 1:1 quote from chapter 266 of *Hunter x Hunter*. There is a lot—and I do mean a *lot*—of deep lore that's required to understand what's going on in the scene where the line is dropped, but the simplified version is that it's delivered by a character named Knuckle Bine, who is astonished by how powerful a character named Menthuthuyoupi is (hence Tomoyo's comeback). Hakoware is Knuckle's supernatural power (Or "nen ability"), which is themed around predatory interest rates (hence the use of the word "bankrupt").

Chapter 3:

△ 'Here the great poet and heart-reader discerned one of the deepest and most mysterious traits of the human spirit,' he said of one passage, and called the novel on the whole 'the grandest and saddest book conceived by the genius of man.'

These are, in fact, real Dostoevsky quotes! They're taken from *A Writer's Diary*, a compilation of his various writings both fictional and non-fictional. This passage was far and away the hardest reference in the novel to track down, thanks in no small part to the fact that the two halves of this quote come from entirely different sections of the original work.

The story behind the passage still goes a little deeper than that, though! You might be wondering why Kiryuu would be familiar enough with Dostoevsky's diary to directly quote two passages separated by hundreds of pages, and I can say with great confidence it's *not* because he's actually read *A Writer's Diary*. After all, the quotes he references are lifted 1:1, word for word, from the Japanese Wikipedia page on *Don Quixote*!

That's right: less than a page after Andou calls himself out on only having a Wikipedia-level understanding of the literature he loves to reference, Kiryuu *directly* quotes Wikipedia at him without batting an eyelash. Personally, I see this as an extremely meta but important characterization moment for both Andou and Kiryuu (which is unfortunately lost in translation by virtue of the English Wikipedia page for *Don Quixote* making no mention of Dostoevsky whatsoever).

△ Edison, who disputed the idea that one plus one must equal two.

This line probably stood out as strange to American readers, and there's a very good reason why! It comes from an apocryphal account of Edison's childhood, where allegedly he made the argument that in some cases 1 + 1 = 1 on the basis that when you stick two mud balls together you get a *single*, albeit larger, mud ball.

The funny thing about this story is that it appears to be *entirely* unknown in the English-speaking world. I've found absolutely no evidence of the incident ever being mentioned in any English sources, trustworthy or not; meanwhile, over the course of my research on the Japanese side of the internet, I actually found an article that noted the lack of English sources for the story, and said article speculates that it was made up wholesale by a Japanese person.

△ I'm talking, like, Kudou Shinichi- or Yagami Light-level incredible.

Kudou Shinichi is the protagonist of Aoyama Gosho's *Case Closed* (sometimes referred to as *Detective Conan*), an incredibly popular manga that was adapted into an equally popular anime. Shinichi is a high school

genius who works as a detective in spite of his age, even after he’s turned into a little kid through anime shenanigans. Yagami Light, meanwhile, is the protagonist of *Death Note*, and he is also portrayed as a genius in just about every field.

Chapter 4:

△ What was it…Kuroko's Back Skin Mole?

This pun took a lot of work (on my editor's part—it totally stumped me, honestly) to make work in English! The original story behind Hatoko's wacky misunderstanding is that the main character of *Kuroko's Basketball* is named, well, Kuroko, and that name is written with the exact same characters used to write "mole" in Japanese. She knew how the name of the manga was written, but she knew so little about the story itself that she didn't know how it was actually read, so she said the word for "mole" instead.

△ Y'know the dragon in* The NeverEnding Story*?

This is the only pop-culture reference in volume one that had to be altered entirely for the sake of accessibility! The original text referenced the opening theme to *Manga Nippon Mukashibanashi*, a classic edutainment anime from the 1970s that primarily focused on retelling Japanese folktales. The opening features a dragon flying through the air with a little kid riding on its back.

The problem, and the reason why we decided to alter the reference, is that while this would be an accessible reference to a Japanese reader, it would be almost impossibly obscure for anyone living outside of Japan. To make matters worse, it's very difficult to find the opening in question online unless you have a semi-functional grasp of searching the internet in Japanese.

Our options were to either add in a substantial quantity of explication or to come up with another piece of media more accessible to our readers that features an appropriate, similar image. As luck would have it, a very famous piece of media was available that featured an iconic image so appropriate, it fit right in without us having to alter the surrounding text at all!

Since the core of the joke revolved around Andou's super cool dragon being ruined by a little kid on its back, and since the actual nature of the piece of media reference mattered much less than the image it conjured, we decided that in this one specific instance the more heavy-handed localization would be the better approach for the sake of communicating the original text's intent.

△ This isn't a dark dragon—it's the main character of that one yakuza comic, Hakuryu!

Hakuryu is another manga that's fairly well known in Japan, but has never been officially published in English. Written by Tennouji Dai and illustrated by Watanabe Michio, the story centers around Shirakawa Tatsuya, a crime lord who earns the nickname Hakuryu, or "White Dragon." As Sayumi notes, the series regularly uses dragon imagery of the same sort

that Andou describes in this chapter.

△ …you're drawing Hakuryu, the famous actor who's done a bunch of yakuza movies!

This Hakuryu, on the other hand, is the stage name of a real person. His real name is Jun Jung-il, and he's made a name for himself both for playing ruthless, hardened criminals in yakuza films and as a musician. He's also done a certain amount of work in the anime industry, having portrayed Tonegawa Yukio in the anime adaptation of *Kaiji* and a thinly veiled version of himself named "White Ryu" in *Zombieland Saga: Revenge*.

△ …a card that was first seen used by Dinosaur Ryuzaki, but was eventually claimed by Jonouchi…

Also known as Rex Raptor and Joey, if you're familiar with the English dub of *Yu-Gi-Oh*.

△ Hey, you're going for something like Hiei's arm in YuYu, right?

In this case, *Yuyu* refers to Togashi Yoshihiro's *YuYu Hakusho*, one of the manga referenced in the context of *Jump*'s golden age back in chapter one! Hiei was a character who was initially introduced as an antagonist, but he quickly became a fan-favorite character and eventually joined the main cast of the manga.

By modern standards, his character design is as chuuni as it gets, from the Evil Eye on his forehead to the dark dragon on his arm to the curse bindings that Tomoyo references later on in this chapter. He is, in short, an extremely influential character in manga history, and considering that one of his major powers—the Dragon of the Darkness Flame—involves him summoning black flames that dwell within his right arm, it's fairly safe to say that he's a personal favorite of Andou's.

△ Think of it in Swords Aren't Online terms…

Though the reference itself here isn't even remotely obscure—it's an obvious shoutout to *Sword Art Online*, a mega-popular light novel series by Reki Kawahara—it *is* notable in the sense that it's the only title in the entirety of volume one that's obviously, intentionally censored. The Japanese text actually renders it as "SA◯", with ◯ being a character that's very commonly used to censor the titles of pieces of media like this. In this case, of course, it's so ineffectual it's downright hysterical, so I'm inclined to suspect that they only censored it for humor's sake.

△ Think about Anpanman. Every episode, Bacteriaman does something to mess up Anpanman's head, but Uncle Jam bakes him a new one that he uses to save the day!

Anpanman is a long-running children's cartoon that's all but inescapable if you find yourself in Japan. Anpan is a sort of sweet bread roll stuffed with

red bean paste, and Anpanman is a superhero whose head is made out of the stuff. Anpanman's creator makes new heads for him on a regular basis, which is good, since he regularly lets people eat parts of himself.

△ ***And take* Mito Komon*...***

Mito Komon was an exceptionally popular period drama that ran from 1969 to 2011—the longest running period drama in Japanese television history. Set in the 17th century, the show featured the serialized adventures of a fictionalized version of Tokugawa Mitsukuni, a powerful political leader of the era.

In the context of the show, Mitsukuni travels incognito under the name Mito Komon, roaming across Japan to fight crime with his two retainers, Kakunoshin and Sukesaburo. The stamp case that Andou references is a prop that more or less appears in every episode. Since the case can be clearly identified as belonging to Mitsukuni, the shtick is that he can flash it whenever he solves a crime to prove his identity and use his authority to dispense justice.

△ ***Why else would Uncle Jam mutter 'Bring forth new life, Golden Wind!' under his breath every time he's kneading the bread for Anpanman's new head?***

Golden Wind is the Stand that GioGio, the protagonist of *JoJo* Part 5, uses. Its power gets used in so many creative and outlandish ways that it's sort of hard to describe exactly how it works in a succinct and accurate fashion, but for the purpose of this reference, all that you need to know is that it can grant life to inanimate objects.

△ ***There's no going back now...I don't remember how to put these back on.***

This isn't just Andou being silly—it's also a word for word quote from *Yu Yu Hakusho*.

△ ***Rin-pyo-toh-sha-kai-jin-retsu-zai-zen!***

These are the kuji-in, a series of mudras (or hand seals) with religious significance in a variety of sects. They're particularly associated with Shugendo, a religion known for its practitioners traveling into the mountains for ascetic training purposes.

As for why Andou's doing mudras, Tomoyo's comeback more or less spells it out: one of the practices that has incorporated the kuji-in over the centuries happens to be ninjutsu, and modern-day media has appropriated them as more or less ninja magic. They bear an unmistakable resemblance to the hand seals in *Naruto*, for instance.

△ ***Spiral staircase! Rhinoceros beetle! Desolation Row! Fig tart! Rhinoceros beetle! Via Dolorosa! Singularity! Giotto! Angel! Hydrangea! Rhinoceros beetle! Singularity! The secret emperor!***

Yup, more JoJo! This is a reference to JoJo Part 6, specifically. I'll refrain from going into too much detail on this one, since most English-speaking JoJo fans experience the story through the anime, and the adaptation of Part 6 has only just started airing as of the writing of these notes. Suffice it to say that the phrases play into a central mystery that the part revolves around!

△ ***A real palmtop dragon, as it were.***

This is a very straightforward reference to *Toradora*, a light novel series by Takemiya Yuyuko. One of *Toradora*'s main characters, Aisaka Taiga, is nicknamed "the Palmtop Tiger" by her classmates.

△ ***When a child tells you that they want to be Ultraman or a Kamen Rider when they grow up...***

We've gone over *Kamen Rider* fairly extensively already, but *Ultraman* deserves specific mention as well. The big factor that distinguishes it from *Kamen Rider* and *Super Sentai* shows is the fact that while Rangers and Kamen Riders remain generally human-sized, the Ultramen grow to massive sizes when they fight their enemies, most of which are giant monsters (or kaiju, to use the genre lingo).Picture a giant Power Ranger throwing down with Godzilla, and you'll have more or less the right idea.

Chapter 5:

△ ***Not the president of the student council, not God, not even DIO!***

DIO is, of course, a character from *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. Not just any character, though—he's the most notorious villain in the series' history. Not only does he play a starring role in both Parts One and Three, he's also referenced constantly in most of the other parts as well.

Chapter 6:

△ I've imagined what Devil Fruit I'd eat, what sort of Zanpakuto I'd wield, what Stand I'd awaken to, and what Nen ability I'd possess.

These are, respectively, references to the supernatural power systems from *One Piece*, *Bleach*, *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, and *Hunter x Hunter*. Devil Fruits are magic fruits that give you superpowers (at the cost of your ability to swim), Zanpakuto are magic swords that give you superpowers when they're powerful enough, Stands are manifestations of the Stand User's spirit that give you extremely weird superpowers, and Nen abilities are techniques powered by an individual's aura—simply put, they're basically superpowers in and of themselves.

△ I can stop time and shout 'WRYYYYYYYYYYY!' all I want...

This is yet another *JoJo* reference! It's also another DIO reference, as it so happens. DIO is a vampire who frequently shouts "wryyyyyy," particularly when he attacks people. This tends to happen whenever he uses his Stand, The World, to stop time.

△ Some random new character just NTR'd Dark and Dark, right before my eyes...

NTR is an abbreviation of the Japanese word "netorare," which basically means, well, cuckoldry. It's a term that's very frequently used in a pornographic context—hence Tomoyo's appalled reaction.

And on that note, that's all the references worth mentioning in volume one! Last but not least, I've translated the author's and illustrator's notes from the inside cover, which you'll find below. I hope you've enjoyed this little feature, and I hope to see you again in the next book!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 1

I was in the tennis club back when I was a student, and every time I bought a new racket, I always made a point of secretly giving it a name. Racket #1 was called Raven, #2 was Black Oak (since the pattern of its strings reminded me of the latticework you sometimes see made from black oak wood), and #3 was Khronolucifer (khrono being a pun on "chrono" and "kuro," the Japanese word for black). Needless to say, every one of them was black.

Illustrator: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works) and *Dragon Lies* (Published by Shogakukan).

This hand of mine glows with an awesome power! Its burning grip tells me to defeat you! Take this—*Shining Fingeeeeeer*! (Brandishing my manuscript)

That should tell you all you need to know about what sort of person's illustrating this series.

Table of Contents

Cover

Characters

Chapter 1: Long Story Short, We Got Superpowers

Chapter 2: Multiple Names Are Obligatory

Chapter 3: A Fateful Encounter

Chapter 4: Allure of the Dark Dragon

Chapter 5: Universal Crane Game Theory

Chapter 6: Reverse Crux Record

Epilogue

Afterword

A Preview for Next Time: A Glimpse into Kudou Mirei’s State of Mind

Color Illustrations

Bonus Translation Notes

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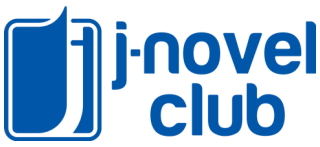

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